

# 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.<sup>1</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 *linguistic convention* among ancient Hebrew speakers—namely, how to succinctly express an endeavor that involves both a

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For the ten excursuses, go to <https://purl.org/stein/sbl/angels-2>. See also my online companion article on a related linguistic convention, “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.

<sup>1</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 *pāšaṭ* (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.

*principal* and an *agent*.<sup>2</sup> By “principal” I mean a party whose interests the agent represents; by “agent” I mean a party who is empowered to stand in for, or speak for, the principal.<sup>3</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 linguistic convention involved. I will dwell at some length on the first two texts, neither of which involves a deity. After the convention has become clear, it will be applied 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>4</sup> Ultimately I will show that divine embodiment

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<sup>2</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 Literal Language in Biblical Interpretation,” in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, eds. 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.

<sup>3</sup> To be clear, I am using “agent” in the sense evoked by the everyday terms *real estate agent*, *ticket agent*, and *secret agent*—and not in the senses used in semantic analysis and in the cognitive science of religion (‘a self-motivated force or character’) or in narrative analysis (‘a secondary character who advances the plot’).

<sup>4</sup> Many recent scholars—especially historians of religion—have described one or more of the Hebrew Bible’s depictions of divine communication with humans as “embodiment” or the equivalent, including in human form. These scholars resolve the divine references in the biblical texts by taking the referring expressions literally. See, e.g., 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, *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*, eds. 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.

is *not* the plain sense, on the grounds that such a construal disregards the linguistic convention in question—a convention that would have taken priority in the ancient audience’s interpretation. In short, although there is little overt theology in this paper, if you listen closely you may hear the creaking sounds of a theological edifice as it starts to crumble.

## #1. Bathsheba Speaks Through an Unmentioned Messenger (2 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:<sup>5</sup>

וַתְּהַר הָאִשָּׁה	The woman <sup>6</sup> became pregnant;
וַתִּשְׁלַח	she sent [word]
וַתַּגִּד לְדָוִד	and <u>she</u> informed David <sup>7</sup> —
וַתֹּאמֶר הִרָה אֲנִי:	<u>she</u> said, <sup>8</sup> “I’m pregnant!”

This verse poses a challenge in terms of coherence, as the text’s 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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.)

<sup>6</sup> 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. Prototypically in ancient Hebrew, the situating noun אִשָּׁה/אִישׁ is used to regard its referent in terms of the depicted situation. See David E. S. Stein, “The Situational Noun in Ancient Hebrew: A New Understanding of אִישׁ” (paper presented to the Biblical Lexicography section at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, San Antonio, 22 November 2021), <https://purl.org/stein/situational>.

<sup>7</sup> This third clause denotes a distinct, salient step within the larger messaging process. See further Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–49.

<sup>8</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 by convention (see Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–49). A possible alternative construal, that the intended referent is a womanly messenger, is less likely because it requires more processing effort—namely a shift in participants and an additional assumption that specifies the messenger’s gender. (On the normal human construal of language, see below, note 38.)

“informed” David as she spoke the quoted words.<sup>9</sup> How, then, would the ancient audience have formed a coherent picture of this narrative?<sup>10</sup>

The usual and reflexive way that people resolve such a dissonance is to treat our clause as an expression of *metonymy*.<sup>11</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>12</sup> Now, there are many types of metonymy. My focus is

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<sup>9</sup> In this paper, “literal” means prototypically that the 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).

<sup>10</sup> At issue is not the *sense* of the words—that is, the semantics—but rather how they 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. 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).

<sup>11</sup> As of this paper’s delivery in 2017, metonymy in biblical Hebrew narrative had not received sustained study, and that still seems to be the case in 2022. No work on that topic was cited by Tamar Sovran, “Metonymy and Synecdoche,” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* 2:636 (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Metonymy in poetic imagery has received more attention; see, e.g., Kevin Chau, “Metaphor’s Forgotten Brother: A Survey of Metonymy in Biblical Hebrew Poetry,” *JSem* 23 (2014): 633–52, <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC166262>. One of Chau’s conclusions (p. 650) serves as the epigraph of the present paper. On metonymic construal as a reflex, see Excursus 1, “The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy.”

<sup>12</sup> 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 (2017): 353, doi:10.1111/cogs.12341; and Jerry Hobbs, “Syntax and Metonymy,” in *The Language of Word Meaning*, eds. Pierrette Bouillon and Federica Busa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 290. The present paper deals only with making personal reference via 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 this type of metonymy, see Antonio Barcelona, “Reviewing the Properties and Prototype Structure of Metonymy,” in *Defining Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics: Towards a Consensus View*, eds. Reka Benczes, Antonio Barcelona, and Francisco Jose Ruiz de Mendoza Ibanez (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2011); Geoffrey Nunberg, “The Pragmatics of Deferred Interpretation,” in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, eds. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 347; Gregory L. Ward, “Equatives and Deferred Reference,” *Language* 80 (2004): 262–77, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4489663>.

on references to persons, and in particular to a special class that I have dubbed *agency metonymy* (hereinafter “AM”).<sup>13</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 practice*. This type of metonymy actually makes reference to both of those parties at the same time. Here is how that works in our example, in three steps:

1. The verb וְהִשְׁלַח (‘she sent’) evokes cultural knowledge about the ubiquitous practice of messaging.<sup>14</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.

Now we must ask:<sup>15</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

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<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</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*, eds. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 724–41; here 737, doi: 10.1002/9780470756959.ch32.

the more salient character;<sup>16</sup> to make the narrative more cohesive;<sup>17</sup> to define the frame through which we view that implied character—namely as Bathsheba’s agent;<sup>18</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.

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.<sup>19</sup> This basic concept then licensed the following linguistic convention, which is evident throughout the biblical text:

Any speaker<sup>20</sup> may treat an agent’s authorized action or speech as if it were the principal’s.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</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>17</sup> On enhancing textual (narrative) cohesiveness, see Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 76–77.

<sup>18</sup> 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 then *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.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, agents (and those who dealt with them) were expected to observe certain protocols, in order for the arrangement to be perceived as legitimate. For example, agents were supposed 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>20</sup> By “any speaker” 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>21</sup> In its depictions of human activity, the Bible uses AM constantly. The classic example is **וַיִּבֶן** **שְׁלֹמֹה אֶת-הַהֵבֶיית** “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 personal reference could be adduced that require construal as AM (in light of the situational context). 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 literally accomplished this feat single-handedly.

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. 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 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>22</sup>

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

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

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל “**Israel** said to him,  
נַעֲבְרָה־נָּא 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>23</sup> The obvious answer is: that is what leaders do—they act to 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>24</sup> 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; foremost in his mind is surely the national interest.

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

<sup>22</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>23</sup> 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).

<sup>24</sup> See Deut 2:26; cf. Num 21:21.

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>25</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>26</sup>

As many linguists have noted, metonymy can be a highly compact and economical means of expression.<sup>27</sup> It arises from, and relies upon, the automatic associative function of human cognition.<sup>28</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>29</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 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

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> Such a construal also preserves narrative continuity, for “Israel” has been the thematic actor in Jephthah's discourse for several verses prior.

<sup>27</sup> In AM, referencing the principal points to a richer and more complex whole, namely the agency relationship, with its leveraging 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*, eds. Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden, Human Cognitive Processing 4 (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999), 13.

<sup>28</sup> As the cognitive psychologist Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., explains, “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*, eds. Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden, Human Cognitive Processing 4 (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999), 61–76; here 68.

<sup>29</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.



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, the literal construal of AM can produce vivid and memorable results. Indeed, such readings are featured in the interpretive genre known as midrash.<sup>30</sup>

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Turning now to two depictions involving the 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 (Gen 19:12–14)

In Genesis 19, two agents of Israel’s God have arrived in Sodom; the narrator has designated them as מְלֹאכִים (literally, ‘messengers’). Here in vv. 12–13 they reveal their plans to Abraham’s nephew, Lot:<sup>31</sup>

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֶל-לוֹט . . .      Then the men<sup>32</sup> said to Lot,

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<sup>30</sup> “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). Compelling interpretations have regularly been produced by construing the Bible’s conventional metonymies literally—a disarmingly straightforward approach with considerable aesthetic appeal. For example, 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 annotations, Daniel Matt calls this type of reading *hyperliteral*, for the resulting interpretations are extravagantly more literal than the plain sense; *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003–2016).

<sup>31</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 לשחתה.)

<sup>32</sup> On the discourse significance of the label האנשים here, see above, note 6. Its classic English rendering as “the men” is now archaic, because the English noun’s meaning has in recent usage become markedly gendered and human-oriented. In ancient Hebrew, the denotation of האנשים was not restricted to human beings, and its main function as a referring expression was to (re)situate its referent, not specify their gender. See David E. S. Stein, “Notes on Gender in Translation,” prepared for the Jewish Publication Society, <https://purl.org/scholar/gender-notes>, s.v. “Man and Its Special Function” and “The Situation-Oriented Construal of איש.”

... כִּי־מִשְׁחֵתִים אֲנִיחֵנוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה . . . “ . . . We are about to destroy this place. . . .  
 וַיִּשְׁלַחֵנוּ יְיָ לְשַׁחֲתָהּ: Yahweh<sup>33</sup> 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 וּצְאוּ מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה “Get up and get out of this place!  
 . . . כִּי־מִשְׁחֵתִית יְיָ אֶת־הָעִיר . . .” Yahweh is about to destroy the city. . . .”

In this case, both the principal (called *Yhwh*) and the agents (called אַנְשֵׁים) 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!” Although this is not the literal meaning of Lot’s utterance, it is the plain sense.

#### #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.

... וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים מַלְאָכִי יְיָ <sup>12</sup> Yahweh’s messenger engaged him [in conversation]<sup>34</sup>  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו . . . and said to him . . .

<sup>33</sup> To represent the tetragrammaton as the name of Israel’s God, this article respectively 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.

<sup>34</sup> On *niphal* רָאָה as a verb of communication, typically denoting its initiation, see below, note 58 (end).

- ... וַיִּפֹּן אֵלָיו יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר 14 **Yahweh**<sup>35</sup> turned<sup>36</sup> toward him and said, ...  
הֲלֹא שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ: “**I** indeed<sup>37</sup> dispatch you.” ...
- ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְיָ כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ 16 **Yahweh** said to him, “**I** will be with you...”
- ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים 20 God’s messenger said to him, ...  
וְהִנֵּחַ אֶל-הַסֵּלַע הַלֵּז: “Put [it] on that rock...”
- ... וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְיָ שְׁלוֹם 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 human cognitive preference for coherence and narrative continuity,<sup>38</sup> 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

<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. For as discussed below, a participant-reference tracking problem remains in this passage nonetheless.

<sup>36</sup> This verb does not otherwise introduce speech (except if the two parties are not already facing each other; 2 Sam 2:19–20). Typically, *nearness* is 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. Consequently, “turning toward” expresses, in spatial terms, a shift in the discourse toward the business at hand (cf. 2 Kgs 23:16; Eccles 2:12). As such, it is a *paralinguistic act* that serves to open the essential communication; cf. Frank Polak, “Participant Tracking, Positioning, and the Pragmatics of Biblical Narrative,” in *Advances in Biblical Hebrew Linguistics: Data, Methods, and Analyses*, eds. Adina Moshavi and Tania Notarius (LSAWS 12. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 164 n24.

<sup>37</sup> The particle הֲלֹא 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 הֲלֹא in Biblical Hebrew,” *JANES* 32 (2011): 91–105, <https://janes.scholasticahq.com/article/2516.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Human construal of language favors the simplest account that matches the expectation of informativeness. See Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 551–52, and below, note 51.

“divine embodiment.”) So what happens if we construe this passage in light of the same linguistic 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.<sup>39</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 ’ēlōhîm*. He is identified as serving in this role on behalf of his principal, as is normal for an agent.<sup>40</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*.

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 saying that Yahweh spoke, the narrator means: “The angel spoke *with Yahweh’s authority*.”<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 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 v. 23 and Josh 6:2, and Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides, ca. 1320) at Judg 6:14, <https://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Shofetim/6/14#e0n6>. So 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 metonymies as motivated by linguistic conventions rather than by theology.

<sup>40</sup> In a similarly concise manner, human agents are labeled 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.

<sup>41</sup> 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.)

<sup>42</sup> Cross-linguistically derived discourse and pragmatic considerations in participant reference

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.<sup>43</sup>

Granted, contemporary English or German or Hebrew speakers would not talk in these ways when narrating a dialogue or describing messaging, but languages differ in this respect.<sup>44</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 construe the text as both coherent and informative.<sup>45</sup>

## Interim Summary

Table 1 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—

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support the putative effects of AM, as follows. Whenever the narrator then substitutes another label (*Yhwh*; vv. 14, 16, 23) for the angel's established, default referring expression, it highlights the angel's following speech as particularly salient or surprising (or both). 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>.

<sup>43</sup> If it seems strange for an agent to speak on the principal's behalf in the first person, that can be attributed to unfamiliarity with the linguistic convention. To the text's ancient audience, for whom a first-person delivery was a messaging norm, this would have occasioned no surprise. And because it was normal, its depiction in a narrative was optional—a matter of what best served the interests of the story. See Excursus 3.

<sup>44</sup> See Excursus 4, "Metonymy across Languages."

<sup>45</sup> 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.

with its trigger being a wide variety of reference-tracking challenges. In short, AM is a versatile device.

*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 messengers (v. 1)	Yahweh's messenger
Verb(s)†	<i>wattagēd</i> <i>wattō`mer</i>	<i>wayyišlah</i> <i>wayyō`mer</i>	<i>mašhit</i>	<i>wayyīpen</i> <i>wayyō`mer</i>
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	Active	Active
Reference tracking problem	<i>Physical</i> <i>remove:</i> who informs?	<i>Personification:</i> who negotiates?	<i>Divergent</i> <i>attributions:</i> who destroys?	<i>Interlocutor shift:</i> 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.

## Cognitive Priority Is Given to Agency Metonymy

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

<sup>46</sup> 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.

<sup>47</sup> In his prepared remarks, Sommer stated: “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.”

<sup>48</sup> Legions of modern scholars, working in different corners of biblical studies, have striven to make

featured in his renowned 2009 book *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*. In order to solve our participant reference problems, Sommer made a key assumption, namely an 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>49</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>50</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

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sense of the anomalous participant references in question (what I call the hallmarks of AM). To date, almost everyone seems to have construed the texts' invocations of God literally, which does not enable all of the reference challenges to be resolved. For a helpful categorization of the theologically oriented approaches—many of which do not focus on embodiment—see now Daniel O. McClellan, *YHWH's Divine Images: A Cognitive Approach*, ANEM 29 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022), 157–164; for an appraisal of those approaches, see Andrew S. Malone, “Distinguishing the Angel of the Lord,” *BBR* 21.3 (2011): 297–314. Some scholars have posited systematic emendations by ancient scribes, e.g., McClellan, *YHWH's Divine Images*, 157–63; Dorothy Irvin, *Mytharion: The Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978). Meanwhile, a few scholars have concluded that the texts' composers were engaged in intentional mystification, e.g., Michael B. Hundley, “Of God and Angels: Divine Messengers in Genesis and Exodus in their Ancient Near Eastern Contexts,” *JTS* 67.1 (2016): 1–22; Nissim Amzallag, “The Identity of the Emissary of YHWH,” *SJOT* 26/1 (2012): 123–44.

Other scholars proffer nontheological solutions, including the notion that God's agents are simply doing what agents do, by representing their principal; e.g., René A. López, “Identifying the ‘Angel of the Lord’ in the Book of Judges: A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci,” *BBR* 20.1 (2010): 1–18; Mart-Jan Paul (“The Identity of the Angel of the Lord,” *Hiphil* 4 (2007): 1–12; above, n. 39).

Finally, a few scholars have attributed the anomalies here and there to textual corruption. However, E. J. Revell already rightly observed that the anomalies are too common to be dismissed as mistakes; he concluded programmatically: “It is thus a methodological requirement that the usage of the text be treated as self-consistent” (*Designation of the Individual*, 14).

<sup>49</sup> See Excursus 5, “Critique of Sommer's Methodology.”

<sup>50</sup> The AM explanation is not new; see Excursus 6, “Agency Metonymy within the History of Biblical Interpretation.”

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 normally expected in that context. Because the *conventional* directs us toward the most likely outcome, it is favored over the *unconventional*.<sup>51</sup>

To return to the biblical text’s ancient audience, I am not claiming that to them, agency was more important than theology. But I would say that in depictions of agency situations, they would have found the conventions regarding agency to be the most *salient*. I say this due to the following three considerations.

First, in ancient Israelite society, AM was conventionalized.<sup>52</sup> It was based upon a tight conceptual coherence between principals and the agents who represented them.<sup>53</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>54</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

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<sup>51</sup> 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 Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, “The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process,” *Poetics Today* 7 (1986): 289–90, 278–79.

<sup>52</sup> By “conventionalized” I mean that it is based on a conceptual generalization (in this case, agency) that allows for the metonymic relation to hold independently of the 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 metonyms is parsed by the audience. See Excursus 1.

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

<sup>54</sup> See Excursus 7, “The Cognitive Entrenchment of Agency Considerations.”



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.<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</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

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<sup>55</sup> In the 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 Sīrān 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*, ed. and trans. Anson F. Rainey (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 363, 393–95.

<sup>56</sup> See Excursus 8, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents.”

<sup>57</sup> See Excursus 1. 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 normally construe the text as Sommer and other scholars have done.

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>58</sup>

## Conclusions

Agency metonymy (AM) enables narrators and speakers to deploy a referential anomaly so as to refer to *both* the principal and the agent by mentioning only the principal. The parties in those roles retain *conceptually distinct* identities, even when this device momentarily superimposes them for purposes of narrative art and communicative efficiency. Because AM is a pointed and concise manner of expression, it is employed to highlight the principal’s authority behind an agent’s speech or action.<sup>59</sup>

This paper encapsulates a more extensive research effort that includes another sixteen passages that involve God’s agents.<sup>60</sup> As confirmed by that fuller analysis, the theological conclusions are:

- 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.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> 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. That being said, some ancient Hebrew verbs definitely allow AM, even if their classic English glosses do not. One such verb that appears often in the biblical passages where scholars have perceived divine embodiment is וַיֹּאמֶר, literally ‘he said’. (For AM with this verb and a *human* principal, see our first two examples, and rows 4 and 5 in Excursus 3; with *God* as principal, the oracles are already noncontroversial instances: Gen 25:22–23; Judg 1:1–2; 20:18, 23, 27–28; 1 Sam 23:9–12; 2 Sam 21:1.) Another such verb is וַיִּרְאֵה, traditionally ‘he appeared’ but more accurately ‘he made contact’—that is, initiated and established communication. See Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 554, 585–587.

<sup>59</sup> A narrator may deploy AM not only while recounting an event but also to sum up the episode—as in Gen 16:13 and 18:33.

<sup>60</sup> See Excursus 10, “Implications of Metonymy for Other Passages Involving God’s Agents,” on Gen 16:7–13; 18; 21:17–18; 22:11–14; 31:3, 11–13; 32:23–33; 48:15–16; Exod 3:1–10; 3:7–12; 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.

<sup>61</sup> 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 linguistic 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.

- 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 linguistic conventions for describing agency situations.<sup>62</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>63</sup>

## Excursuses

This paper’s ten excursuses, along with their own bibliography, are posted online at <https://purl.org/stein/sbl/angels-2>.

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<sup>62</sup> 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 or for compiling a theology.

<sup>63</sup> As for God’s communications or deeds where no agents are mentioned, in general such depictions are best construed as *unspecified* regarding an agent’s involvement—either because the means whereby is not the text’s concern, or because the audience is supposed to infer that involvement, given that the depicted action is typically performed by an agent (i.e., the wording is recognized as a reference anomaly, as in our first two examples above). Because references to God by default include “...and any agents,” arguably some biblical instances of so-called theophany are, in their plain sense, depictions of agency—such as Gen 17:1–22 (so Ibn Ezra at v. 22), 35:9–13 (given v. 13); 2 Kgs 10:30 (so Kimḥi), and 2 Chr 33:10 (so Ibn Ezra at Isa 7:10).

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