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Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical Interpretation

Resolving Cruxes in Gen 18:1–15 and 32:23–33¹

David E. S. Stein

Biblical discourses that to us appear vague, elliptical, or even defective may be ones in which the speaker was simply assuming a high degree of overlap between his or her own scripts and those of the hearers.

—Peter J. MacDonald

One of the Bible’s best-known encounters between agents of Yahweh and an individual person is recounted in Gen 18:1–15.² Three visitors who present themselves to Abraham soon proclaim a message of divine blessing upon him and his wife Sarah: she will bear a son.³

A similar and likewise well-known case occurs two generations later, as recounted in 32:23–33.⁴ Abraham and Sarah’s grandson Jacob undergoes an overnight ordeal at the hands of an intruder, before receiving a dawn blessing: a new name. Jacob eventually articulates his belief that the intruder was a divine being of some kind.

In both cases, biblical scholars have long differed over exactly when Abraham and Jacob each *recognize* that the newly introduced characters are representing Yahweh, and whether Yahweh is personally present on the scene. Most of the recent treatments conclude that Abraham and Jacob believe at first that they are facing ordinary human

¹ This article will often cite a companion piece, “Angels by Another Name,” which (like this one) examines a narrative convention and its exegetical consequences. Both articles are addressed to theologians who are concerned with the text’s plain sense—and how it differs from other interpretations.

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² To represent the tetragrammaton as the name of Israel’s God, this article employs the equivalents “Yahweh” in English, ׃ in Hebrew, and *Yhwh* in transcription. The first is a standard academic reconstruction of its original pronunciation; the second is a standard Jewish substitution.

³ Nearly all interpreters agree that at least two of the visitors are messengers; after all, they are explicitly labeled as such in the next scene (19:1, 15).

⁴ This article refers to verses within Genesis 32 by their Hebrew enumeration, which differs from that found in many translations.

being(s); their recognition of Yahweh's involvement is delayed.⁵ Seldom noted nowadays is one of the oldest recorded plain-sense readings of these two scenes: Yahweh is represented by agents, whom Abraham and Jacob recognize immediately as such.⁶

The present study defends the latter view. It employs cognitive considerations to show that the text's *plain sense*⁷ is that Abraham and Jacob know at once that they are dealing with their deity's messengers.⁸ Accomplishing this task involves the following steps:

- account for the place of messengers in the mental life of ancient Israel;
- establish a narrative convention that is germane yet usually overlooked;
- construe the initial portion of each narrative via an emulation of the way that the human mind normally processes language;
- generate a reassessment of the semantics of the main verb in the first account; and
- incorporate a reassessment of the semantics and pragmatics of the main noun in both accounts.

Each of the above steps draws upon insights from *cognitive linguistics* or related disciplines such as *psycholinguistics* and *cognitive psychology*. The cognitive motivations

⁵ Numerous scholars who proffer this majority view will be cited below.

Regarding Abraham, a few modern scholars instead claim that he realizes right away that his deity has personally appeared: Keil and Delitzsch (1866) at 18:1–15; Sailhamer (1992) at vv. 1b–8; and Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis* (2002), 159–161, 265.

⁶ Regarding Abraham: Rashbam (12th c.) at Gen 18:2; Hiz'kuni (13th c.) at v. 2; Nahmanides (13th c.) at v. 3; Bahya ben Asher (13th c.) at v. 2; Benno Jacob (1934) at vv. 1–2.

Regarding Jacob: Rashbam and David Kimḥi (12th c.), as implied at 32:25. Actually, already in the 1st century, Philo of Alexandria had preceded his allegorical interpretation of Gen 32:25 with a plain-sense analogy that likened the two parties to an athletic coach who is wrestling with his trainee (*De Somniis* 1:129; pp. 366–367). Such an analogy presupposes that the trainee knows his coach's identity from the start—which implies that Jacob likewise knew the angel's true identity.

⁷ I define “plain sense” loosely as being “bound by considerations of grammar, syntax, and context” (Lockshin, “*Peshaṭ and Derash*,” 2). On the impossibility of defining it concisely, see Ariel, “Privileged Interactional Interpretations.” It is more than “what the text says” or its “literal” meaning. As Ronald Langacker explains: “Equally important for [cognitive] linguistic semantics is how the conceptualizer chooses to construe the situation and portray it for expressive purposes” (Langacker, *Concept, Image, and Symbol*, 315). On the plain sense in rabbinic interpretation, see Lockshin, *op. cit.* On how the variability of what counts as “context” blurs the boundaries of the plain sense, see Greenstein, “*Peshaṭ, Derash, and the Question of Context*.”

⁸ Like the commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra (11th c.) at 18:13, this article is agnostic as to whether the visiting messengers in the Abraham story are human or not.

for each step will be either explained or referenced or both. All told, I draw upon a variety of cognitive factors as keys to interpretation.

Messengers: Basic Observations and Terms

In order to orient us within the world of messaging and agency and to chart an initial course, let me outline some basics.

- In the widespread social arrangement known as *agency*, an “agent” represents the interests of a “principal.” The “agent” is authorized to stand in for, or speak for, the principal.⁹ Agency was often considered to be legally and morally binding.
- Agency was integral to ancient Israelite society; the dispatching of agents and couriers was an everyday occurrence (for purposes of commerce, diplomacy, family relations, and military need). It was thus highly *available* as a frame of reference. Indeed, the conceptual coherence between principals and their agents was so tight that in many settings, it was conventional for speakers and writers to reference a principal by mentioning only the agent; and vice versa.¹⁰
- Messaging is a type of agency; a messenger speaks or acts on the principal’s behalf. Hence findings that are true of agency in general must also be true of messaging. We can learn about messengers in ancient Israel by studying other instances of agency. Conversely, we can learn about agency by studying messaging as a typical case.
- The Bible depicts various kinds of messengers as representing Israel’s God. Some of them seem straightforwardly human, whereas others are commonly called “angels” in

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, this article employs the term “agent” as defined above—which differs from its use both in *semantic* analysis (where it denotes “a self-motivated force or character”) and in *narrative* analysis (“a secondary character who functions to advance the plot”).

¹⁰ Such linguistic usages are grounded in societal conventions and motivated by the metonymic thought process that is fundamental to human cognition. For a fuller discussion, see my “Angels by Another Name,” which focuses on the narrative convention that I call “agency metonymy.”

English.¹¹ This article’s topic does not actually require us to distinguish the above types.¹²

- In English, the term “messenger” applies not only to someone who delivers a message, but also to an agent who does errands.¹³
- The Hebrew term מְלַאֲכִים *mal’āk* (usually glossed as “messenger”) has a similarly broad scope of application.¹⁴ Biblical characters who are designated by this term variously delivered messages; negotiated agreements; investigated situations; delivered, fetched, or procured goods; summoned persons; and more.¹⁵

¹¹ In this article, the term “angel” refers to messengers of Yahweh whose individual identity is depicted as subservient to their mission, and who are capable of superhuman feats. Whether the ancients conceived of such beings as divine or human is not of concern. This admittedly imprecise usage provides a convenient contrast with the depiction of more clearly human messengers, who exist apart from their mission and who lack superpowers.

¹² Hence this article does not engage the historical development of the concept of angels, nor the possible distinction between מְלַאֲכִים *mal’āk Yhwh* (customarily rendered “an/the angel of Yahweh”) and other angels.

Three lines of evidence converge to establish a functional equivalence between Yahweh’s messengers and those dispatched by other principals: both types behave in ways that are consistent with the same protocols; both types are depicted as doing the same deeds; and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, messenger deities are likewise depicted as behaving like human messengers. See further Excursus 8, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents,” in my “Angels by Another Name.”

Distinctions between human and divine messengers are negligible for our purposes. For example, the Bible mentions a sword only with regard to apparently divine מְלַאֲכִים *mal’ākîm* (messengers). Yet this attribute cannot be unique to them, for we can safely assume that some human מְלַאֲכִים likewise wore a sword—for that would have been the conventional means to fulfill a police mission (1 Sam 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:31–32).

¹³ See, e.g., “Messenger,” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Web. 25 May 2018. (Hence the term “messenger” in this article does not necessarily imply the delivery of a verbal message.) “Doing an errand” can variously mean delivering or retrieving goods; conducting business; performing a service; or otherwise attending to a matter of concern to the principal. This extension of the word’s meaning beyond simply “someone who delivers messages” is understandable given the shared underlying principle of agency and the functional identity of *speaking* versus *acting* on someone else’s behalf.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Freedman and Willoughby in Freedman et al., מְלַאֲכִים, TDOT, 314–315. In contrast to the generalizing development of the term “messenger” in English (see the previous note), the semantic range of מְלַאֲכִים appears to have extended in the specifying direction: from the performance of errands of all kinds toward the delivery of messages as its prototypical activity.

¹⁵ The dispatch of messengers to *apply force or coercion* against a particular party is treated below, in the discussion of Genesis 32.

- The term “messenger” can be applied to biblical characters who are not labeled מַלְאָךְ *mal'āk* yet share the same function. The Bible repeatedly uses the term מַלְאָךְ in co-reference with other role terms.¹⁶ The high frequency of such substitutions suggests that when parties are elsewhere performing a messenger function while being designated solely by another role term, they are nonetheless equivalent to a מַלְאָךְ for the present purpose. A representational relationship between principal and agent obtains regardless of the label used for the latter (if a label is used at all—for as we are about to see, the agent is often presupposed).
- The principle of parsimony commends our consideration of all instances of agency when we interpret texts about the deity’s messengers—which is our goal.¹⁷

Licensing “What Goes Without Saying” in Depictions of Messengers

I will now establish a largely overlooked narrative convention in the ancient Near East, regarding messengers.¹⁸ Shared linguistic conventions add meaning to what is explicitly stated in a text. Knowing those conventions enables us to construe the biblical text according to the accepted rules of human language—that is, to establish the plain sense.

In the ancient Near East, a messenger’s activity prototypically involved a fixed sequence of steps.¹⁹ In order for the delivered message to be authentic—or the delegated task to be legitimate—messenger norms and protocols had to be followed.²⁰

¹⁶ See Excursus 1, “מַלְאָךְ *Mal'āk* and Its Co-referential Role Terms.” (This article’s excursuses contain extended discussion on supporting topics, especially those that are less directly theological.)

¹⁷ An implication of the principle of parsimony—also known as Occam’s razor—is that we should assume that any topic “known from a certain cultural sphere” (in this case: agency) will “have that same literary effect or value . . . in all its various occurrences unless there is a marked reason for thinking otherwise” (Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 17).

¹⁸ When the Bible depicts the delivery of a message, the latter is sometimes introduced with a formula that identifies the principal explicitly, e.g., Exod 5:10. Such “messenger formulas” have been extensively studied by other scholars and are treated in this article only in passing. Here we are concerned mainly with recognizing a messenger where *no such introduction* is depicted.

¹⁹ See Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, who structures his monograph in terms of the steps involved in messaging. (He also discusses 1 Kings 20 as an exemplar of schematization in messaging, 40–41.) See also the sources cited in Excursus 2.

²⁰ The protocols were observed both by messengers and those who dealt with them. For a sampling of expectations for messengers as evident in the Bible, see my “Angels by Another Name.” Compare the advice of the Egyptian vizier Ptahhotep (Part II, section 8; ca. 2200 BCE): “If you are a man of trust, / sent by one great man to another, / be exact when he sends You. / Give his message as he said it.”

The overall process was apparently conceptualized as a unified whole. This is what cognitive linguists call a “script.”²¹ A *script* is the culturally shared outline of what participants normally do and say at each stage in a certain frequently recurring sequence of events. A messaging script is one such encoding of cultural knowledge, about how to maintain reliable communication—and carry out delegated actions—at a distance.²²

Biblical narratives skip many details of the messaging process.²³ For example, in 2 Samuel 11:6, the narrator is describing the aftermath of King David’s surreptitious adultery with Bathsheba in his palace, after he has learned of her pregnancy:²⁴

וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד אֶל-יֹאָב	David sent [word] to Joab:
שְׁלַח אֵלַי אֶת-אֻרְיָה הַחִתִּי	“Send me Uriah the Hittite.”
וַיִּשְׁלַח יֹאָב אֶת-אֻרְיָה אֶל-דָּוִד:	So Joab sent Uriah to David.

Most of the messaging process is elided; the very existence of the king’s messenger is merely implied.²⁵ How do our minds manage readily make sense of such a passage, given such significant gaps in the stated information? That is, how is the elision handled cognitively?

It is processed in the same automatic, associative way that a mind normally functions. Consider that hunters in the wilderness can detect merely a footprint of their desired prey and readily infer the existence of an entire creature. We apply this same cognitive ability to cultural scripts, so that perceiving a salient *part* of that procedure evokes the *whole* script, including its participant roles.²⁶ And we also apply it to our language, by using the

²¹ See Excursus 2, “The Cognitive Entrenchment of Messaging”; MacDonald, “Discourse Analysis and Biblical Interpretation,” 160. The concept behind the term “script” arose in the fields of computer science and social psychology; it soon found a home also in the newer discipline of cognitive linguistics. See Ungerer and Schmid, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 207–217.

²² Scripts are useful, for they enable people to quickly accomplish ordinary things together. They help us to coordinate joint endeavors without our having to renegotiate every step.

²³ See Excursus 3, “Elision in Biblical Depictions of Messaging.”

²⁴ The text of this verse is stable for our purposes; no significant variants are extant in the textual witnesses. (A Qumran manuscript shows a cohortative verb form rather than the imperative in the Masoretic text; and some Septuagint manuscripts include a finite verb of speaking prior to the message content.) Unless otherwise noted, the translations in this article are my own.

²⁵ The Masoretic text’s unusually laconic description of messaging here (without even a complementizer to introduce the gist of David’s speech) may perhaps be explained by its narrative impact: it iconically represents the king’s sense of urgency and his resolve. For a similar construction, see 2 Sam 19:15.

²⁶ Reliance on scripts is a special case of the fundamental cognitive operation known as metonymy (Littlemore, *Metonymy*; Gibbs, “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy”).

depiction of a salient part of that script to conjure the whole of it.²⁷ As the cognitive psychologist Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., notes, “Experiments show that people automatically infer appropriate script-related actions when these are not explicitly stated.” He adds that this inference capability “facilitates our being able to assume unstated propositions about what writers mean.”²⁸

Because the messaging script was *conventionalized* in the ancient Near East,²⁹ the Bible’s composers could rely upon their audience to be familiar with it whenever it depicted messaging.³⁰ That is why no biblical messaging episode bothers to mention all of the steps that are involved. Most of those steps are elided—and even the required messenger may be omitted, as in our example.

The Default Assumption about the Recipient’s Knowledge

As we will see, one step in the messaging script has true theological import: *Announce the sender’s identity*. Its necessity is dictated by the logic of the messaging situation: a message cannot be considered to have been truly *delivered* until its recipient knows who sent it.³¹ We can be sure that the recipient is keenly interested in the sender’s identity, as

²⁷ At issue is how words are *used to communicate* (not merely what they themselves mean—that is, their semantics). This is the realm of the linguistics discipline known as *pragmatics*, which (among other things) explores the difference between what is stated and what is communicated thereby. Arie Verhagen expresses the consensus view of linguists that “in actual utterances more is communicated than what is encoded in the conventional meanings of the signals used” (“Cooperative Communication,” 233–234). An audience will typically calculate added meaning so as to maintain a basic assumption of communication: a speaker—in bothering to speak at all—is attempting to be *informative*. Conversely, an audience assumes that, for the sake of relevance, the speaker will say no more than needed to get the point across. Hence a “superfluous” word will be construed as having added meaning (Yule, *Pragmatics*, 35–46).

²⁸ Gibbs, “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” 68–69.

²⁹ By “conventionalized” I mean that it is based on a conceptual generalization (namely agency) that allows for the metonymic part-whole relation to hold *independently* of an immediate context of use. This property renders that metonymic relation *highly available* in the mind. For details and for the advantages of using metonymy in texts, see Excursuses 1 and 7 in my “Angels by Another Name.”

³⁰ The messaging script was likewise used to depict messaging by the Judahite author of Arad ostrakon 24:18–19 (ca. 600 BCE): הנה שלחתי להעיד בכם היום “Take note: I have sent [word via a messenger] to warn you today.” See also Arad 16:1; 21:1; 40:2. These instances confirm that in ancient Israelite discourse, the elision of most of the messaging process was conventional.

³¹ Meier likewise notes that “self-identification is necessary for adequate communication” (*Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 181; so also his *Speaking of Speaking*, 289).

the latter's authority will condition how to respond.³² Hence, expeditious announcement must have been the norm for this step.³³

Precisely because the recipient's identification of a messenger as the sender's agent was a *normal* part of the messaging script, it usually did not need be mentioned in a depiction of messaging.³⁴ Rather, the text's composers could presuppose that the audience was familiar with it. This shared knowledge then licensed a *narrative* convention, which applies when the text's audience already knows the sender's identity:

*By default it can be assumed that upon a messenger's arrival,
the recipient knows the sender's identity.*

Let us call this the "recipient recognition" (RR) convention. Its use is expected unless the precise origin of the recipient's awareness—the specific trigger—is of particular concern.

The existence of any convention is established by matching its *likely cognitive motivation* with a *consistent pattern of usage*. We have explained this narrative convention in light of basic human cognitive abilities, so let us now look at the actual usage patterns. The RR convention must be operating in our example (2 Sam 11:6), for how else do we determine that Joab knows *whose* message it was? The messenger's royal authority had to be clear enough to convince Joab to release a soldier from the front lines; but this step is nowhere mentioned.

In much the same way, the RR convention is evident throughout the Bible's depictions of messaging situations within the human social realm.³⁵ Furthermore, it is

³² To situate this concern within the societal context of ancient Israel, see Excursus 4, "Interest in Establishing an Interlocutor's Affiliation."

³³ See Excursus 5, "Ancient Near Eastern Messengers' Prompt Identification of Their Principal." The norm allowed for exceptions, e.g., when messengers were already known to the recipient and known to work for a particular sender (e.g., 2 Sam 18:26–27). Yet even they needed to distinguish their own words from their master's. As for professional messengers—such as in the employ of a monarch—perhaps they wore a uniform or insignia that made them recognizable *by sight*. (For evidence, see Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 60.) In any case, the recipient was expected to know the sender's identity *before* the message was delivered.

³⁴ On the apparent exceptions, see Excursus 6, "Explicit Mention of Announcing the Sender's Identity."

³⁵ See Excursus 7, "More Elision of a Recipient's Recognition of a Messenger's Principal." Apparently the same narrative convention obtained in other ancient Near Eastern literatures. Meier reports that a messenger's explicit statement of self-identification was likewise the exception rather than the rule in the written records of those cultures (*Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 186).

evident that many messengers of Israel's God are depicted using the same convention.³⁶ In other words, the RR convention applies also to biblical depictions of divine participants, as well as for human beings.

Being a convention, an audience will apply it automatically during their construal of texts *in which they believe that a messenger is present*. Such application would obtain regardless of whether recipients' recognition of a messenger as such (and of the principal's identity) is implied by the depiction of their subsequent speech or behavior.

What Qualifies as the Plain Sense

Before I present and discuss two competing interpretations of the Genesis 18 passage, let me address *how they should be assessed*. What are the proper criteria for determining a text's plain sense? I propose that we emulate the cognitive process by which (according to scientific research) any audience reliably fixes the plain sense of any narrative.³⁷ Assuming that human cognition has remained substantially constant from ancient Israel until now, then what is known about *the mental processing of linguistic input*—which has

³⁶ See Excursus 8, "Intrahuman Messaging as a Template for Depictions of Divine Messaging," which discusses the evidence both in straightforward cases (Gen 16:7–13; 21:17–18; 22:11–14; Jud 2:1–4) and in more oblique ones (Num 22:22–35; Judg 6:11–24; 13:2–23).

³⁷ Some scholars have questioned whether it is even possible to reconstruct the reliable construal of the text's ancient audience (in the sense of its "implied reader"). For example, Edward Greenstein—a leading proponent of applying Reader Response Theory in biblical studies—contends that "the claims of this or that interpreter or narratologist are no more than assertions, to which exceptions can readily be invoked and to which exception can readily be made" ("Reading Pragmatically," 112). Nonetheless, I find it useful to distinguish between degrees of assertion. In this section of this article, I focus on establishing what the text "says" (its plain sense); later, in the Discussion section, I will focus on what it "means." Although those two aspects cannot be strictly separated, the former one seems less subject to interpretation than the latter one. Furthermore, we can establish the grounds for judging one construal as more persuasive than another.

been a topic of study in both cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics—is the best standard for weighing the construals of a text.³⁸

How the Mind Handles Language

I am interested here in what is called *online* processing—the way that human minds make sense of a text (including spoken utterances) in real time, given various cognitive constraints, such as a buffer of working memory with limited capacity.³⁹ In order to take advantage of the robust conclusions about online language processing from psycholinguistics and related disciplines, I will adopt the heuristic of a mental faculty called the *parser*. Although the human brain does not contain such a faculty that one can point to, for our purposes it operates *as if* it did. The steps and methods involved in language comprehension have been measured and shown to be predictable. Such consistency justifies reifying this function and giving it a name. My recourse to the parser concept is meant to remind us that the processing in view is not conscious or under voluntary control. As an expedient, I will personify the parser by stating that it “questions,” “wonders,” “expects,” or “concludes” certain things. However, the

³⁸ If what we are ultimately seeking to understand is the intent of the text’s *composers*, then how does it help to focus on the *audience’s* process of construal? By emulating the audience’s construal, we actually emulate the thought process of the text’s composers, as follows. Presumably the composers are seeking to communicate. If so, then as part of their act of composition they necessarily place themselves in the position of their presumed audience, imagining how the words will be received—and then shaping them accordingly. Communication is then successful to the extent that the composers anticipate the audience’s construal. Both parties predictably rely upon conventions (of word meaning and usage, syntax, information structure, genre, etc.) and assumed knowledge about the world, to guide them in their respective roles. As Paul Noble has explained, the most worthwhile meanings in a text are found through interpreting it “in relation to the milieu of its production” (*Canonical Approach*, 197).

In what follows I am making the same idealizing assumptions about the text’s audience that the composers of the text presumably made—e.g., the audience consists of fluent speakers of Hebrew who can hear the presenter perfectly and are paying constant attention.

³⁹ For an introduction to this topic as it applies to biblical studies, see MacDonald, “Discourse Analysis.” For a highly readable introduction to language processing, see Bergen, *Louder Than Words*. For the consistency of my description of language processing with general human cognition, see Daniel Kahneman’s magisterial summary, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 20–21, 45, 51–52, 80, 105.

operations described are not discretionary.⁴⁰

The conclusions derived from numerous scientific experiments are as follows: our parser processes texts incrementally. To handle an incoming stream of linguistic data, the parser creates a mental representation of the discourse that the text's composer (or the speaker) has undertaken. (That discourse model is populated by participants/referents whom the parser must keep track of.)⁴¹ From the very start, the parser generates a set of possible interpretations of what is intended. Based on prior knowledge and experience, it makes predictions about what is coming next.⁴² When the next word is registered, it updates its model and accompanying expectations. As the parser's encounter with the text proceeds, it keeps on modifying and winnowing its calculated guesses. It even accounts for what is conspicuous by its absence.⁴³ The goal: to find a "good enough" interpretation of the text. Consequently, if the parser finds that a particular construal would enable it to view that text as cohesive and informative, it will be adopted.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ I adopt the term *parser* from psycholinguistics. As science historian Oren Harman notes, this heuristic approach makes sense "for the same reason we describe electrons 'jumping,' galaxies 'exploding,' birds and monkeys 'falling in love.' Because science is a form of competitive storytelling" ("Will Genes Resonate in the Future?"); see also Kahneman, *Thinking*, 29, 77. The heuristic artifice should be familiar to theologians who discuss a *personal* God to whom one prays and renders allegiance. When the Bible depicts a deity who converses with people and dispatches agents—which is a reification and abstraction that is analogous to the parser—that is a useful and compelling way of accounting for spiritual reality.

Some cognitive linguists prefer to eschew processing models and instead base their work directly on what is known about the neurological functioning of the brain (see Lamb, *Pathways of the Brain*). However, at the level of analysis that is needed to answer the question at hand (the comprehension of particular texts), that approach would be needlessly complicated here.

⁴¹ Kintsch, *Comprehension*, 11–119. Although the notion of a discourse model (cognitive representation) is fundamental to information theory, it is itself a construct of cognitive science, and the underlying neurolinguistic mechanisms are not well understood. A typical caution is that of the linguist Jean Aitchison: "The exact specification of the mental models which apparently exist in a person's mind is still a long way beyond our current ability" (Aitchison, *Words in the Mind*, 89).

⁴² Predictions are influenced by various factors, including: the tendency of certain words to be used together, semantic associations, plausibility given the thread of the particular discourse and its situational context, and intonation (Brothers et al., "Effects of Prediction"; Huettig, "Four Central Questions about Prediction").

⁴³ Ramscar et al., "Error and Expectation"; Wasserman and Castro, "Surprise and Change."

⁴⁴ Ramscar and Port, "How Spoken Languages Work"; Kuperberg and Jaeger, "What Do We Mean by Prediction"; Van Petten and Luka, "Prediction during Language Comprehension"; Karimi and Ferreira, "Good-enough Linguistic Representations." For citations of additional studies in psycholinguistics and in literary theory, see my "Angels by Another Name."

We can liken the mind's processing of language to a cross-country bicycle race in which there is no prescribed route. The team that wins is the one whose members work together the best *and* that follow the path of whatever is *expected* in the given context.⁴⁵ By taking the expected route, they encounter fewer obstacles; in contrast, those who flout convention must expend extra effort calculating a new route. *Conventions* that direct the mind toward the most likely outcome are like paved roadways; they are favored over the *unconventional* dirt paths.

Experiments have also repeatedly shown that the process tends toward a decisive result. Once the parser has reached a construal that paints a coherent and informative picture, it commits to that version with high confidence. Alternative construals are abandoned—and do not even reach consciousness.⁴⁶

I will sum up our parser's text-processing approach via an informal rhyme:⁴⁷

*It jumps to what fits,
then with confidence quits.*

Obscured Origins and Theological Solutions

As I noted at the start, most recent scholars—especially historians of religion—have

⁴⁵ Audiences tend to interpret an utterance (or text) according to “the most stereotypical and explanatory expectation given our knowledge about the world” (Huang, “Implicature,” 623).

⁴⁶ Kahneman emphasizes one aspect of the parser that is “adept at finding a coherent causal story that links the fragments of knowledge at its disposal. . . . [It is] a machine for jumping to conclusions” (*Thinking*, 75, 79).

⁴⁷ The following couplet overlaps with a two-part maxim from Relevance Theory (within cognitive linguistics) known as the “Comprehension Procedure”: (1) “Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: test interpretive hypotheses . . . in order of accessibility.” (2) “Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned)” (Wilson and Sperber, “Relevance Theory,” 613).

perceived Gen 18:1–15⁴⁸ as depicting an angelophany (or theophany) in which the divine messengers (or deity) were not recognized as such until after delivering their message.⁴⁹ Although interpreters' explanations differ in their details, I will refer to this now-standard position schematically as the “obscured-origin” (OO) construal.

A representative view is that of James Kugel, who calls this biblical passage an “encounter with unrecognized angels.” He opines that “Abraham seems to be in some sort of fog” about their identity. The Bible depicts these angels as “odd, humanlike figures that fool people for a while and then, at a certain point, come to be recognized for who they are.”⁵⁰

Kugel presupposes that recognition of the deity's (divine) messengers is so momentous that it cannot be assumed. If not stated outright or inferable from the immediate proceedings, such a recognition must not have occurred. Consequently, Kugel then offers a theological accounting for the observed “fog.” He concludes that the figures whom Abraham encountered were *in disguise*—hiding their identity as divine agents. A

⁴⁸ What is the proper starting point for our text of interest? The preceding account (chapter 17) describes the circumcision of males in Abraham's household, including a summary passage (vv. 24–27) that signals the end of an episode. Hence 18:1 is a valid beginning. Nonetheless, the present account is connected on a grammatical and discourse level with the prior one: the pronominal suffix of the second word of 18:1 (אֵלָיו *'elāyw*) is referentially co-indexed with Abraham's name in 17:26. Some classical rabbinic exegetes include that prior account in their context for interpretation of the present episode, which prompts their conclusion that Abraham's ritual surgery has now opened up his ability to perceive the ways of the divine. That is, the prior episode is cited to explain why Abraham's recognition of his visitors' identity is surely immediate. However, in order to justify that conclusion (rather than presuppose it), the present narrative must establish Abraham's rapid recognition *independently* of the circumcision account. Consequently, the following analysis will not consider chapter 17 as germane (except for a telling linguistic usage in v. 1, as discussed below).

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, ad loc.; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 206–207; Westermann, 276–277; Greenstein, “God of Israel,” 57*; Sarna, *Genesis*, at verse 3; Hamilton, ad loc.; De Regt, *Participants in Old Testament Texts*, 76–77; Kugel, *God of Old*, as quoted below; Bolin, “The Role of Exchange,” 44–47; Cotter, ad loc.; Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 47, 79; Wenham, *Genesis*, at v. 1; Hamori, *When Gods Were Men*; idem, “Divine Embodiment”; Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 40; Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative*, 31; Smith, “Three Bodies of God.” Lyons cites and discusses additional modern interpreters with this view, *Canon and Exegesis*, 157. Meanwhile, Knafl, *Forming God*, is exceptional in construing two theophanies yet remaining undecided as to whether Abraham and Jacob are aware of them right away; 109–120, especially 111, 114, 119–120.

On whether this passage depicts a direct theophanic encounter between God and Abraham, see below.

⁵⁰ Kugel, *God of Old*, 10, 12, 21. On page 13, he observes that by verse 14, “the truth does seem to have dawned on the couple” (that is, Abraham and Sarah).

common interpretation is that Abraham is granted God's promise of progeny after having passed a hospitality test imposed by the disguised visitors.

However, based on what this article has discussed so far, we can see that an OO construal like Kugel's has serious shortcomings. In the following three respects, it is at odds with how human minds naturally construe a text.

1. *It flies in the face of convention.* Ostensibly, the visitors deliver divine blessing without first making the bestower's identity known to the recipient. But by the RR convention, a parser would infer that the principal's identity was known to the recipient *before any message at all was delivered*—whether such recognition was stated explicitly or not. Conversely, due to the same convention, that parser would not conclude that Abraham remained ignorant unless his lack of awareness had been *explicitly* stated.⁵¹ Mere hints would not suffice, because a text's plain sense is a function of the parser's expectation.
2. *It yields a sensible narrative only at the cost of a special assumption*, namely, the visitors' recourse to disguise. However, whenever a parser is forced to revise its discourse model, it expends extra processing effort. True, in the ancient Near East, the idea of divine beings in disguise was known—but it was unconventional behavior for messengers, including divine ones (and for deities).⁵² As such, it was not particularly likely to occur to a parser as an explanation, without priming by the narrator.
3. *It paints the narrative itself as either inarticulate or artfully laconic.* Significant plot points—such as adopting the ostensible disguises and making a reckoning of Abraham's success—are oddly left unstated. In other words, the audience is left in

⁵¹ For the implicit underlying principle of interpretation in pragmatics, see above, note 45. Meanwhile, the biblical composers were demonstrably capable of telling their audience when a character did not recognize someone (e.g., Gen 19:33, 35; 27:23; 38:16; 42:8).

Citing a similar narrative convention of recognition, John Lyons argues against the OO construal on the grounds of parsimony. (He is not concerned about the agency-related convention that I adduce, because he views Abraham's visitors as *directly* embodying the deity.) Lyons first observes that “the claim that Abraham only gradually becomes aware of the presence of YHWH is as lacking in explicit foundations as the claim that Abraham recognizes YHWH immediately.” He then reasons that “Abraham's... ability to recognize YHWH in every other relevant text should create a strong presumption towards just such a recognition here” (*Canon and Exegesis*, 159–161; see also 265).

⁵² The OO construal yields a picture that, according to Von Rad, is “strange and singular in the Old Testament” (204). And as for Canaanite and other ancient Near Eastern literature and epigraphy, Esther Hamori's review concluded that there was “no basis” anywhere for the notion that a deity appears *in disguise* in human form (*When Gods Were Men*, 81, 149).

nearly as much of a “fog” as Abraham himself.⁵³ Yet as we have seen, our human parsers prefer to construe a story as cohesive and informative.

In short, if the ancient audience construed these texts as posited by the OO interpretation, they did so in the face of a strong cognitive headwind, to say the least.

A plain-sense interpretation with such a high degree of *cognitive implausibility* ought to prompt biblical scholars to keep looking for a better one. So in that spirit, I will now offer another solution—one that I contend is far more likely to have been the ancient audience’s default construal, according to the proposed criteria. I will lay it out in stages, via a simplified emulation of the parser’s handling of the story’s first five clauses. That will suffice to settle the matter.

How Gen 18:1 Creates an Expectation of Imminent Communication

Our passage begins:⁵⁴

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְיָ בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵא . . .

Wayyērā’ ’ēlāyw Yhwh bə-’ēlonē mamrē’ . . .

Yahweh _____ (to) him at the Oaks of Mamre. . . .

The immediately preceding passage recounted certain executive actions of Abraham as the head of his household. He was the center of attention, and so the other discourse participants were designated in relation to him.⁵⁵ That existing state of affairs explains the present clause’s recourse to a pronominal suffix: the pronoun signals that its referent is to be found among those who are already active and identified in the parser’s discourse model.⁵⁶ As the center of attention, Abraham is the obvious candidate for the pronoun’s antecedent; the audience’s attention now remains on him.

By all accounts, this initial clause sets up a new expectation for the audience—a promise that eventually will be fulfilled as the story progresses. But what exactly is that

⁵³ William Miller exemplifies modern scholarship in claiming also that the biblical account “*maintains an ambiguity* as to the exact nature of the divine and angelic visitations by means of its identifications and enumeration of subjects and speakers” (*Mysterious Encounters*, 7; emphasis added). Yet I will contend that much of the ostensible ambiguity can be resolved; see below.

⁵⁴ The text of Gen 18:1–2 is stable for our purposes; the ancient translations and other witnesses do not attest any material variants.

⁵⁵ On participants to whom others are anchored as being the audience’s “center of attention,” see Runge, “Pragmatic Effects,” 90.

⁵⁶ On what a pronoun signals, see Heimerdinger, *Topic, Focus, and Foreground*, 123–124.

promise? It is a function of the opening verb, whose root is **ראה** *r-ʿ-h* with a Niphal stem, and which is usually rendered as “appeared.”⁵⁷

Because the meaning of our verb is seldom questioned, let me pause to call attention to the inadequacy of the conventional wisdom about it. In an unusually thorough treatment of our verb in the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum alten Testament* (published in English translation as TDOT), Hans Fuhs expresses the challenge that we face in Gen 18:1 when he explains our verb’s meaning there in two incompatible ways: It is an instance of “God’s appearance at a site that thus becomes holy.”⁵⁸ Yet, he adds, it does not indicate a visible theophany; rather, it is a mere “stylistic device used to introduce a narrative culminating in a promise uttered by the deity.”⁵⁹ But how can it both depict “God’s appearance” and be a “stylistic device”? Given such evident contradiction in a major reference work, perhaps a reconsideration of the data is in order.

My reassessment, based on cognitive considerations, suggests that Niphal **ראה** *r-ʿ-h* (when it takes a personal subject) almost always functions within a frame of *communication*.⁶⁰ By default, it denotes the *advent* of communication; our verb’s subject meanwhile designates the party who initiates that communication. This meaning is cognitively licensed, in part because a distinct hailing-and-negotiation-of-terms stage is necessary before actual communication can proceed between any two parties.

Normally, the stage of setting up the communication can go without saying, because it is both required and usually routine. Communication evokes a cognitive script, which the parser uses to fill in such gaps in its depiction. However, Niphal **ראה** (or an equivalent verb) is employed in depictions where that advent stage is *not* taken for granted. It can usually be glossed in English as “make contact with” or “get in touch with.”⁶¹

To return to our emulation of the ancient plain-sense construal of the opening clause of Gen 18:1, two meanings of our verb seem workable upon first hearing: Yahweh “made contact with” Abraham, or Yahweh made a literal “appearance” to him. The parser seeks

⁵⁷ “Niphal” is a conventional name for one of the standard patterns by which Hebrew verbs are realized from a root. The meaning of the root **ראה** *r-ʿ-h* relates to seeing (visual perception).

⁵⁸ Fuhs, TDOT 13:236. He is apparently led to this view because the verse situates the depicted event at “the terebinths of Mamre,” which he may have imagined as being later considered a sacred grove.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ See Excursus 9, “Niphal **ראה** *r-ʿ-h* as a Verb of Communication.”

⁶¹ To denote the advent of communication, English idiom draws upon the sense of *touch*, whereas Hebrew idiom draws upon the sense of *sight*.

a way to make sense of the story that involves both possibilities.⁶² (By default, the parser prefers to construe the verb in terms of its conventional usage, which is the first option above; but the other option cannot be ruled out at this point.)

Furthermore, due to our opening verb's semantics, the completion of its denoted action is actually a matter of *the recipient's apperception*.⁶³ As long as the verb's action is unfinished business, the parser will search for a construal that enables this condition to be met at the first possible opportunity. It is looking for a reason to understand that Abraham somehow has had that realization. That is the narrator's promise, after all.

When Niphal **ראה** denotes the series of steps involved in establishing contact between two parties—which it usually does—it is often followed *directly* by the message content, as occurred prominently in the previous episode (17:1). However, in the present case, the narration proceeds instead with a circumstantial clause (v. 1b):

וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח־הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:

wə-hû' yōšēb petaḥ-hā'ōhel kə-ḥōm hayyôm.

. . . he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

The audience's parser predictably responds to this clause in three ways. First, in light of the known (expected) alternative approach, it perceives a narrative hesitation here. This deferral of expectation focuses the parser's attention not on the (expected) content of the message, but rather on the circumstances or manner in which communication is being established. It triggers a query in the parser: *So how, exactly, will Abraham notice the advent of communication?*

Second, this clause's information structure now shifts the discourse topic from God to Abraham.⁶⁴ The recipient becomes the new starting point for whatever happens next. The cinematographer's camera, as it were, zooms in for a close-up on the 99-year-old patriarch-to-be. The parser notices this subtle shift in perspective and strives to make sense of it. Given the existing attention on Abraham and the open question about his awareness, it prompts a heightened anticipation of Abraham's moment of apperception of the divine.

⁶² Whenever a verb with two meanings is used in an ambiguous context like this one, the parser activates both of them. See Williams, "Processing Polysemous Words in Context"; Pickering-Frisson, "Processing Ambiguous Verbs"; Foraker-Murphy, "Polysemy in Sentence Comprehension."

⁶³ See Excursus 9.

⁶⁴ On how an author establishes a new frame of reference via the prominent placement of already presupposed information, see Runge, *Discourse Grammar*, "Information Structure" (chapter 9), 7–14.

Third, the parser also wonders: *Why are you telling me this data about place and time?*⁶⁵ In its drive to assimilate the new information as quickly as possible, the parser applies it so as to resolve the open question about the advent of communication. It construes this data as referring to when and where the communication is established.⁶⁶ That is, the parser predicts that Abraham's recognition will occur while the stated conditions obtain—that is, while he is seated at the tent's entrance.

In short, by the end of verse 1, Abraham's recognition is expected imminently.⁶⁷

How Gen 18:1 Evokes an Agency Frame of Reference

Ancient Israelites were well aware that the communicative event that is expressed by our opening verb can be enacted via an agent, including one who serves as a messenger.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Genesis has already depicted Israel's deity as appointing agents (namely, the first human being, 2:15; Noah, 6:13–22), and as messaging with a member of Abraham's household (Hagar, 16:7–14).⁶⁹ So in making sense of our story, the parser could not help but enlist this knowledge about Yahweh.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ The cognitive process of construing any text requires the audience to account not only for *the content* conveyed by the discourse—both explicitly and implicitly—but also for *why* the speaker chose to convey this information. This truism is recognized in both pragmatics (Hobbs, “Abduction,” 737) and literary theory (Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 295).

⁶⁶ In contrast, as one reviewer of an earlier draft pointed out, some interpreters construe this clause's participial construction as framing the visitors' appearance that is described in the *next* verse, which leaves the first clause to stand alone as an executive summary of the narrative that follows. That is a grammatically valid reading—but it is not valid from a discourse perspective. Because this clause follows the previous clause, it is ineluctably drafted to serve the parser's need to interpret that first clause.

⁶⁷ Meir Malbim (ad loc.) likewise expects that “Abraham was ready for the divine communication.” Malbim infers this from the word order in verse 1a: the prepositional object phrase appears prior to the subject noun, in contrast to similar clauses that likewise describe revelatory experiences, as in 17:1 and Exod 3:2. However, it is not clear to me that the postverbal word order in 18:1a is actually marked (out of the ordinary); cf. *BHRG* § 46.1.3.1: “The shorter constituents, which may be expressed by means of a preposition + pronominal suffix, ... typically stand as close to the verb as possible.”

⁶⁸ The semantics of this verb allow for an agent to function as an intermediary. See Excursus 9.

⁶⁹ For a plain-sense analysis that excludes Yahweh from the scene of the angel's encounter with Hagar, see my “Angels by Another Name.”

⁷⁰ On agency as a highly available concept, cognitively speaking, see above, s.v. “Messengers: Basic Observations and Terms.”

In this narrative situation, then, if an agent appeared on the scene, it would have occasioned no surprise to the parser. If a party were now to show up who *it could be safely assumed* was representing the deity’s interests, then such an assumption would readily yield a coherent and informative construal of the narrative thus far—which, as we have noted, is what the parser prizes above all. As we shall now see, such an indication arguably appears in the next verse.

The Designation אַנְשִׁים *’ānāšîm* in Light of Cognitive Linguistics

The narrator now introduces new characters via the term אַנְשִׁים *’ānāšîm* (v. 2):

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו He lifted up his eyes
וַיִּרְא and looked,
וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו . . . and behold, three *’ānāšîm* were standing in front of him.

(ESV, adapted)

This noun (the plural form of אִישׁ *’iš*) is usually interpreted to describe its referent’s appearance: they looked like adult male human beings. However, recent research on its semantics enables us to perceive this label’s resonance in an agency context—which is one of the cognitive frames that, as we have seen, has been enabled by the previous verse.

As noted at the start of this article, in agency situations in the human realm, those characters who function as agents are labeled by various terms (if they are labeled at all). Recently, I analyzed the Hebrew Bible’s usage of terms in the cognitive domain of agency.⁷¹ I concluded that its various terms for agents were hierarchically organized. A generic label (corresponding to the term “agent” in English) serves as a superordinate term (“hyperonym”); its meaning encompasses that of more specialized terms (corresponding to the English terms “messenger, envoy,” etc.). Perhaps surprisingly to many biblicists and theologians, I would assert that what functions as that generic label is the highly polysemous noun אִישׁ *’iš*. It is employed in this way, for example, in the well-known biblical title אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים *’iš ’ēlōhîm* (“Agent of God”).⁷²

In other words, in the taxonomy of terms within the agency domain, a מַלְאָךְ *mal’āk* (“messenger”) is a type of אִישׁ *’iš* (in its sense of “agent”). When the label אִישׁ is used in this capacity, its semantic content is necessarily primal. It concisely conveys the essence

⁷¹ Working title: “The Hierarchy of Agent Labels.” This manuscript is drawn from a monograph in progress.

⁷² Let me point out that in English, when this expression is rendered mechanically as “man of God”—as is nearly universal—it implicitly relies upon an *agency* sense of the noun “man.” (That same sense is seen in usages such as “our man in Brussels,” which refers to an agent.) In other words, the common gloss of אִישׁ by the English term “man” presupposes the latter’s ability to shift to an “agency” meaning.

of agency, namely representation: *this party is acting on behalf of another party* (who may or may not be present).⁷³ In some situations, this meaning is too schematic to be informative; but in many contexts, it tells us what we most need to know.

By virtue of its minimally informative meaning, **שׂא** serves as the default label in already-established agency situations. This explains why **שׂא** is so frequently found in those contexts. A more specific label will be used only if its additional semantic information is salient enough to warrant the higher cognitive processing costs.⁷⁴

If the above hypothesis is correct, the consequences are significant. For the converse implication of my finding is that agency contexts are likely to evoke the “agent” sense of **שׂא**.⁷⁵ And given the parser’s familiarity with agency scripts (such as the messaging script, discussed above), an agency frame can be engendered via the narrative’s introduction of one or more constituents of an agency arrangement, such as a principal’s attempt to communicate with someone, or the presence of a messenger.

In what follows, I will assume that my semantic analysis is correct, so that theologians and other biblical scholars can see its explanatory power—and the kind of interpretive possibilities that it opens up. This exercise is warranted because a crucial validation of any new scientific hypothesis is whether it resolves longstanding cruxes.⁷⁶

Evaluating the Choice of Label (Lexical Options)

Returning to our Abraham story and its referential use of the noun **אֲנָשִׁים** *’ānāšîm*, how does the parser process such words? It evaluates them in terms of two factors: what is predicted by the text processing at that point; and a consideration of what alternative

⁷³ In other words, a designation as **שׂא** as “agent” regards its referent in terms of the only feature that every agent shares—whether their specific role is as an ambassador, attendant, commissioner, delegate, deputy, emissary, envoy, henchman, legate, minister, operative, proxy, representative, steward, subordinate, surrogate, etc.

⁷⁴ The pragmatics of label specificity will be explored below. See also Excursus 10, “On the Noun **שׂא** *’š* as Denoting an Agent.” It offers an introduction to the case, which is based on several converging lines of evidence. This issue is important to biblical studies, given that agency was one of the most active and entrenched cognitive domains in ancient Israelite society (see my “Angels by Another Name”).

⁷⁵ The fact that elsewhere **שׂא** has other meanings (even most of the time) is less relevant. For our present purposes, what matters is what this noun denotes in an agency context—if that meaning thereby enables a coherent and informative construal of the utterance in which it is used.

⁷⁶ Compare the observation of the linguist Reinhard Blutner: “Assumptions about the meanings of lexical units are justified empirically only insofar as they make correct predictions about the meanings of larger constituents” (“Pragmatics and the Lexicon,” 492). In the present case, “correct” is equivalent to “yielding a coherent and informative result.”

terms are known to be available.⁷⁷ That is, the parser does not treat such a noun as having a fixed meaning. What matters is what that label is expected to mean in this context, and its place within the language's existing system of lexical contrasts. With regard to the latter, the parser asks: *What communicative goal is being satisfied by the use of this particular label, as opposed to another label within the same semantic field?* The answer is evaluated in terms of the existing open questions.

So let us consider a likely alternative label, namely the one that is later applied (19:1, 15) to two of these same visitors: מְלֹאָכִים *mal'ākîm* ("messengers, angels").⁷⁸ What if it had been used already here, in 18:2?

... וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה מְלֹאָכִים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו*⁷⁹

**wə-hinnēh šəlošā mal'ākîm niššābîm 'alāyw . . .*

*and behold, three messengers were standing in front of him.

If this had been the word choice, whose messengers would they be? The parser would conclude that the visitors were Yahweh's agents, based on the existing prediction that Yahweh is about to communicate with Abraham.

However, according to my proposed taxonomy (that a מְלֹאָךְ *mal'āk* is a type of אִישׁ *'iš* in its sense of "agent"), the parser would construe this usage as conspicuous. Linguists would call it a "marked" label, because it is more specific than necessary.⁸⁰ And when a statement is more informative than required, it is interpreted as carrying an extra implication or affective overtone.⁸¹ Against the backdrop of a taxonomic hierarchy, its communicative effect is to call attention to whatever features distinguish the more

⁷⁷ Ramscar and Port, "Categorization"; idem, "How Spoken Languages Work." That a listener ascertains why a speaker/author employed a particular word *as opposed to other available words* is a fundamental concept in both cognitive linguistics and structural linguistics. In biblical studies it was championed by James Barr, who advocated "an approach to meanings . . . as functions of choices within the lexical stock of a given language at a given time; *it is the choice, rather than the word itself, which signifies*" (emphasis added; Barr, "Image of God," 15).

⁷⁸ Another candidate noun is גְּבָרִים *gəbārîm* ("men, gentlemen, nobles"). If this had been the word choice, the parser would entertain the suspicion that the visitors might be Yahweh's agents (based on prediction). However, their advent on the scene would remain just one more circumstantial piece of evidence; all of the open questions would remain open until later in the story.

⁷⁹ Here I follow the convention wherein a prefaced asterisk is used to mark an unattested reading.

⁸⁰ Cruse, "Pragmatics of Lexical Specificity," 160.

⁸¹ See above, note 27.

specific category from the more generic one.⁸² To use a hypothetical, contemporary example, consider the impact of two alternative ways to identify the same referent:

Hearing a scratching noise outside, I opened the door and found myself face-to-face with . . .

(a) a dog.

(b) a pit bull.

Most listeners know that pit bulls are reputed to be a ferocious breed. Furthermore, they figure that if that distinctive fact weren't germane, the speaker would simply say "dog." So they infer a sense of menace from (b) but not from (a). In such a situation, the generic label is neutral ("unmarked"); the specific one is extra-meaningful ("marked").

Overspecification in the context of Gen 18:2 would call attention to what distinguishes a *messenger* from an *agent* in general: the dynamic state of being tasked with a mission. (Mere agents represent their principal in a more vague, ongoing, or stationary manner.)⁸³ Yet the fact that these visitors are on a mission can already be inferred from the situation—hence the conspicuousness of the candidate label. The parser would wonder: *Why are you going out of your way to tell me that they are messengers?* Whatever the added connotation,⁸⁴ the text's composer(s) evidently chose to avoid it; they must have been satisfied with the unmarked—and therefore expected—designation.⁸⁵

In light of this alternative label, what then is the import of our verse's actual term, **אֲנָשִׁים** *ānāšīm*? Because verse 1 has already set up an agency frame of reference (in potential), that label would be both germane and informative if taken in the sense of

⁸² Cruse, "Pragmatics of Lexical Specificity," 163; idem, *Lexical Semantics*, 153–155; cf. Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 187.

⁸³ For the usage evidence to support my differential characterization of the nouns **מְלָאךְ** and **אִישׁ**, see my "The Hierarchy of Agent Labels." This usage distinction is consistent with the root meaning **לִאֵל** "to send a messenger/message" (Ringgren, in Freedman et al., TDOT 8:310) versus my more stative understanding of the agency sense of **אִישׁ** as "a participant's participant."

⁸⁴ For the ancient audience, the precise pragmatic import is not clear to me. I surmise that it would have made the visitors' arrival seem intrusive and unwelcome. For example, if the presumption is that "no news is good news," then the parser would predict that these visitors are bringing *bad* news.

⁸⁵ The Bible uses not only the noun **אֲנָשִׁים** to introduce a referent into the discourse after **וְהִנֵּה** *wə-hinnēh* ("and behold"; as here in 18:2), but also the term **מְלָאךְ** in this same way: Gen 28:12 (Jacob's dream); 1 Kgs 19:5 (feeding Elijah); and Zech 2:7 (prophetic vision). However, in contrast with the present case, the messenger's advent is *not* predictable in those situations. Predictability (sometimes called "givenness") alters the calculus of the pragmatic import of a noun's usage.

“agents.”⁸⁶ As noted above, the parser would meanwhile glean their more specific role as “messengers” from the stated situation—namely, that a communication event is underway.⁸⁷

Connecting the Dots

The text’s label is *optimally* informative, for we can now see that the parser has gained enough data to form an associative cluster that “connects the dots” into a recognizable narrative picture. The appearance of this party of three אַנְשֵׁים *ānāšīm* coincides with Yahweh’s having undertaken an initiative. What links these two parties is the familiar messaging script. Yahweh and the new party each correspond to a respective main role in that script. So as usual, the whole script is mentally activated. The parser confirms agency (specifically, messaging) as the frame of reference for this story’s opening. It also tags Yahweh and the visitors with their roles as “principal” and as “agents,” respectively.

This construal of אַנְשֵׁים, if (and only if) it is indeed part of that noun’s semantic potential, enables the parser to conclude that the narrator has employed the opening verb to depict the advent of communication—just as predicted, given the verb’s conventional usage. And because one essential element in establishing communication is that Abraham *recognize these visitors as Yahweh’s messengers*, the parser infers that this must be the case. Thus the narrator’s opening promise has been fulfilled.

Furthermore, that conclusion is consistent with other expectations that the messaging script evokes. One is the RR convention, which conditions how to interpret depictions of messaging. Two other expectations that arise from salient ancient Near Eastern messaging commonplaces likewise reinforce the assumption that Abraham and his

⁸⁶ Conversely, if verse 2a were taken on its own—without the context of verse 1—the parser’s motivation to apply an agency frame of reference to the word אַנְשֵׁים would disappear.

⁸⁷ My emulation of the parser’s construal of אַנְשֵׁים in Gen 18:2 is supported by six other biblical passages in which agents who facilitate communication are introduced into the narrative via similar wording (including אַנְשֵׁים): Josh 5:13; 2 Sam 18:24; Ezek 40:3; Zech 1:8; 2:5; Dan 10:5. All of those agents are initially labeled as אִישׁ. As discussed, my hypothesis predicts that this would be the optimal label (compared to מַלְאָךְ) when the referent’s having a mission (of some kind) is *otherwise clear from the context*. That prediction appears to be borne out: in Joshua, a mission is evident from the opening depiction of that figure as wielding a sword; in Samuel, from the depiction of his running alone; in Ezekiel, from the depiction of him as holding implements; in Zechariah 1, from the depiction of him as being mounted on a horse; in Zechariah 2, from the depiction of him as holding a measuring line; and in Daniel, from the notice in 10:1 that an oracle is anticipated. Indeed, disclosure of information is expected in all cases.

visitors have confirmed their respective identities with each other:⁸⁸ (1) Whenever one person encounters another, they must promptly establish their relative social rank—in order to know how to address (and otherwise express themselves to) each other with appropriate deference; and (2) In establishing rank whenever *agency* is involved, what counts is the social rank of the principal—not that of the messenger. In other words, the parser would presume that Abraham has a pressing need to know who sent his visitors to him.

The messaging script, combined with the selected construal of אֱלֹהִים, now enables the parser to answer pressing questions that the narrative has raised:⁸⁹ *How will the deity communicate with Abraham?* Ah, via these three agents.⁹⁰ *When will Yahweh establish communication?* Right now.

In short, the parser has achieved its goal of a coherent and informative construal. See Table 1 for a convenient summary of the parser’s processing as the story unfolds.⁹¹

{COMPOSITOR: PLACE TABLE 1 NEARBY}

Consequently, already by the middle of verse 2—a mere five clauses into the story—the race of the competing construals is over. At this point, the race’s judge (as it were) declares the winner, confident in the belief that Abraham recognizes his visitors as his esteemed deity’s agents, well before they deliver their message to him. The judge now “knows” that this is the plain sense of the text. If I may be permitted a rhetorical flourish for the sake of emphasis, I would say that the losing contender—the OO construal—barely receives the judge’s nod of acknowledgment; for in comparison to the winner, it was too ponderous and unwieldy to garner attention. What seems remarkable about this outcome is its inevitability. Consequently, the text’s composer(s) could have reliably

⁸⁸ See Excursus 3 in my paper “The Iceberg Effect.”

⁸⁹ In somewhat more technical terms: construing אֱלֹהִים as “agents” is favored because it yields *the greatest reduction in uncertainty* about the communicative intent of the text’s composers. As cognitive linguists Michael Ramsar and Robert Port note, in the context of use—that is, communication—a word’s purpose is “to reduce the listener’s uncertainty about the speaker’s intent” (“Categorization,” 92).

⁹⁰ The narrator has meanwhile prepared the parser for the advent of something unusual: three agents where just one might be expected. If this piece of data was indeed unconventional, it would have been intriguing for the audience’s mind—an opportunity for learning. On how the parser integrates a surprise, see Kahneman, *Thinking*, 71–74, 150, 173–74, 202.

⁹¹ Readers who are used to an OO construal might ask about some of the interpretations that it engenders: Why couldn’t the parser conclude that Yahweh is appearing together with two agents? Or that Yahweh is manifesting in all three figures at once? The answer is: because messaging normally is not conducted in such a manner, and the parser always applies *conventional* solutions before unconventional ones.

predicted it. In their role as the sponsors of the audience’s construal race, it appears that they planned it this way.

Finally, the parser applies its new understanding as it continues to construe the narrative beyond verse 2a. As various commentators have noted, the subsequent details in verses 2b–5 readily align with the conclusion that Abraham has already recognized his visitors, further reinforcing that interpretation.⁹² Abraham behaves just as would be expected of a devotee who knowingly encounters his deity’s representatives.

So Too with Jacob at the Jabbok

In order to ensure that our result for Gen 18:1–2 was not a mere fluke (perhaps involving special pleading), let us apply the same methodology to a similarly famous crux later in Genesis, in 32:23–33, where Jacob encounters an intruder who eventually bestows a blessing. Here, too, a prevailing OO construal holds that Jacob does not know who is blessing him (v. 29) until afterward. The fact that he proceeds to ask for his interlocutor’s “name” (v. 30) is cited in support of this view.

Many scholars have noted that although Jacob clearly realizes the identity of his adversary’s sender by the story’s end (v. 31), there is no clear expression of that realization at any one point along the way. Typically of many scholars, Kugel observes

⁹² Such details include: repetition of the verb **וַיִּשְׁתָּחוּ** *wayyār*; Abraham’s running and prostration; his form of address to the visitors as he issues his invitation; etc. See the commentaries cited above, note 6.

On how the audience would have predictably fixed the referent of the name *Yhwh* in verse 13, see my “Angels by Another Name,” which documents the convention of *agency metonymy* and its cognitive priority. There I show how the text’s composers had grounds to rely upon their audience’s parser to maintain the construal that only God’s agents are present during Abraham and Sarah’s encounter with their visitors.

Reader-response theorists and literary critics have noted that under some conditions, what I have called the race for construal may be reactivated retroactively. That is, new information that is subsequently disclosed in a narrative may provide additional context that must be taken into account in the audience’s act of construal, throwing new light upon the preceding text. (See, e.g., Greenstein, “The Firstborn Plague and the Reading Process”; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 309–20.) However, cognitive psychologists have shown that reconsideration takes more processing effort than does arriving at the initial conclusion; consequently, the evidence for an alternative construal must be stronger than was necessary to reach the first construal. In any case, with regard to Gen 18:1–2, I see no evidence waiting in the wings that might later prompt the audience to reconsider its belief that Abraham has promptly recognized his visitors’ identity. (Similarly for Jacob in Gen 32, below.)

that “once again, the human being seems to be unaware of the angel’s true identity” until the end of the tale.⁹³

This prevailing interpretation shares one disadvantage of the OO construal of Genesis 18 (see above): it paints the narrative as laconic at best. In this case, however, the OO approach yields an understanding of the story that is even less coherent and more opaque.⁹⁴ Here I will give three examples regarding just verse 25:

- The narrator creates a striking logical discontinuity. First we are pointedly told that Jacob is alone. Hence the appearance of any new character at this point would be so unexpected as to force the parser to dramatically revise its “discourse model”; it would require added processing effort. Yet immediately afterward, the narrator tells us that an intruder—otherwise unannounced—is engaged with our protagonist.⁹⁵
- The problem is worse than a merely disorienting surprise. This new character is dropped directly into the main flow of the discourse, by being designated via a noun that serves as the subject of an action verb. In other words, this new figure is suddenly the topic of discussion. Yet in normal narrative discourse, the privilege of such predication is a treatment reserved for referents who are already present in the

⁹³ *God of Old*, 28. So also Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 41. Bahya ben Asher (ca. 1300), Speiser (*Genesis*, 256), Sarna (ad loc.), Hamilton (ad loc.), and Cotter (at 32:22–32) all state that Jacob’s recognition comes at dawn—that is, with his adversary’s first reported speech in verse 27; this is prior to the blessing. Von Rad perceives a gradual awakening: only upon Jacob’s receiving the blessing (v. 29) is he “now clear about the divinity of his assailant.”

⁹⁴ Savran holds that “it is only in hindsight that we realize that he is a divine emissary. The upshot of all this is that the reader is left in the dark together with the combatants” (*Encountering the Divine*, 84). Tellingly, the literary theorist Roland Barthes’ tentative foray into understanding this story (“The Struggle with the Angel”) yielded incoherent results that ought to have raised suspicions about the validity of the initial assumptions. Barthes successively applied three distinct analytical approaches: his favored form of textual analysis, a structural analysis originally formulated for mythical narratives, and a structural analysis devised for folktales. The three methods converged on the admittedly perverse notion that Yahweh, who was playing the role of the Villain, was engaged in blackmailing Jacob until being “scandalously” defeated by him (ibid., 138, 140).

⁹⁵ According to Ehrlich (ad loc.), the notice that Jacob was “alone” serves to explain why nobody from his large household was available to save him from the intruder. However, this is not a convincing reason, given that previous verses have already informed the audience that Jacob’s family was on the other side of the Jabbok.

audience’s discourse model.⁹⁶ In other words, the narration treats this participant as practically expected on the scene. But this is of course impossible.

- By labeling the mysterious figure via the term **אִישׁ** *’iš* (normally glossed as “man”), the narrator provides us with almost nothing to go on. As David Cotter observes, this character “is described only as ‘a man’ . . . to the eternal frustration of readers.” He thus amplifies Gerhard Von Rad’s complaint that “the word ‘man’ is open to all possible interpretations.”⁹⁷ Although the label **אִישׁ** corresponds semantically to its plural form (**אֲנָשִׁים** *’ānāšîm*) in 18:2, here it is somehow less informative.⁹⁸

In short, according to the OO construal, this story is incoherent. Hence Stephen Geller argues that “it is simply impossible to make narrative sense of the episode.”⁹⁹ He then recasts this defect as a virtue: the story’s enigmas must be intentional and artful.¹⁰⁰

As with Gen 18:1–2, I will offer an alternative construal that better matches how audiences make sense of texts. Paradoxically, this construal will first compound the

⁹⁶ New referents are normally introduced more gradually, by being anchored to something familiar or readily identifiable, so that the audience can track the story’s participants. In information theory (which is based on apparent cognitive constraints), the audience’s need to track participants has prompted the Principle of the Separation of Reference and Role. It stipulates that in terms of the audience’s cognitive processing capacity, for a speaker to both introduce a referent and talk about it within the same clause is unduly demanding (Lambrecht, *Information Structure*, 166). See also Heimerdinger, *Topic, Focus, and Foreground*, 134–153; cf. 160–61: “In the course of narrative discourse, the speaker is always making assumptions about the hearer’s state of mind at the time of an utterance, particularly as to whether or not the hearer is aware of the referent.”

⁹⁷ Cotter, at vv. 22–32; Von Rad at vv. 22–28; so also Barthes, “The Struggle with the Angel,” 132, 140. Similarly, Geller remarks that “there is no reason to suppose Jacob’s attacker was anything other than human, a brigand, perhaps” (“Struggle at the Jabbok,” 46).

⁹⁸ The typical OO explanation for this noun’s deployment at this juncture is that the narration is regarding the new character from Jacob’s limited point of view (e.g., Von Rad at vv. 22–28; Alter at v. 25; Wenham, *Genesis*, at vv. 25–26). However, while that interpretation explains the label’s puzzling vagueness, it actually has *no evidence to support it*. The text gives no indication for its audience to suppose that the narration has shifted perspective from omniscience (in the previous clause) to the internal view of Jacob. Of the usual literary means for signaling a new point of view, such as the expression **וַיָּרֶא וַהֲיָה** *wayyār’ wə-hinnēh* that appeared in 18:2, none are employed here. (See “The Poetics of Point of View” in Berlin, *Poetics*, 55–82.)

⁹⁹ Geller, “Struggle,” 47.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. (Similarly Barthes, “The Struggle with the Angel,” 140.) For Geller, the story’s ambiguity befits the mystery of what it means to be called *Israel*; *ibid.*, 54. In reaching this conclusion, he had astutely ruled out the popular interpretation of this story as being the deity’s test of Jacob, calling it “illegitimate” (“Struggle,” 48–49).

challenge by adding another crux into the mix, before solving both of them at once. In other words, it will broaden the context within which we construe the story's plain sense.

Situating the Nighttime Encounter in Context

Significantly, 32:23–33 follows upon another allegedly incoherent passage at the start of the chapter. (Recall that our narrative is part of the larger account of Jacob's return to the land that was promised to him and his forebears.) There, verses 2–3 state:¹⁰¹

וַיֵּקֶבֶת הַלָּיְלָה לְדַרְכּוֹ	Jacob went on his way,
וַיִּפְגְּעוּ-בּוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים:	and messengers of God encountered him.
וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָם	When he saw them, Jacob said,
מִחַנֵּה אֱלֹהִים זֶה	“This is God's camp.”
וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחַנֵּי־אֵל:	So he named that place Mahanaim. (CJPS)

Nearly all exegetes view this passage as a story fragment (etiology) that is linked via parallel motifs and catchwords to an earlier episode (Jacob's overnight stay at Luz/Bethel, 28:10–22).¹⁰² Thus 32:2–3 evokes the previous promise of divine protection (28:15):¹⁰³

וְהִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ
 “Here, I am with you, / I will watch over you wherever you go. . . .” (Fox)

¹⁰¹ The text of this passage is stable for our purposes; the ancient witnesses do not attest any material variants. Some translations—including ancient versions—start the present chapter here, rather than with the previous verse. I am counting according to the standard numbering of the Hebrew text.

¹⁰² Those linkages are compiled, contextualized, and presented in Rendsburg, *Redaction of Genesis*, 62–63.

¹⁰³ So Rashbam (ad loc.). In contrast, Ehrlich comments (ad loc.): “I don't understand the point of this passage. It seems as though something is missing or garbled” (my transl.). Similarly Von Rad writes (ad loc., citing Hermann Gunkel), “There is no direct relation of this appearance to Jacob and his situation, so far as we can see.” Westermann (ad loc.) likewise sees this passage as distinct from the larger narrative; he explains it as an attached item, mentioned in passing: “an event on the way [as recorded in] a journey-note.” Sarna perceives no narrative role for these angels (*Genesis*, 208).

Speiser, who views this Mahanaim encounter as one of Jacob's tests (*Genesis*, 256), vaguely comments (ad loc.) that “the present incident has an inner connection with the encounter at Peniel.”

Moses Maimonides is the rare interpreter who clearly connects 32:2–3 with the continuation of the Jacob narrative (*Guide* 2:42). He construes the clause *and angels of God encountered him* as prolepsis: it discloses the outcome of what is about to be described in verses 4–24. In this reading, verses 2 and 25 actually refer to the same encounter. (Unfortunately, Maimonides does not address the narrative incoherence created by construing the plural label מַלְאֲכִים *mal'ākīm* in verse 2 and the singular label אִישׁ *iš* in verse 25 as co-references to the same party.)

Yet that evocation strangely seems to lead nowhere. The prevailing construal views this passage as both laconic and unconnected to what follows. As Von Rad (ad loc.) concludes: “An impassable barrier is placed for the interpreter.”¹⁰⁴ Let me now remove that barrier, as I emulate this passage’s impact on a coherence-seeking parser.

This passage’s laconic nature would reliably prompt a parser to pose the same question that has vexed the commentators just cited: *What do these מְלָאָכִים mal’ākîm (messengers) have to do with our protagonist, Jacob?* Whatever comes next would then be evaluated by the parser in this light. Cognitive science suggests that the parser is now *primed* to be alert for future interactions between the two parties—or at least not to find such an interaction so surprising.¹⁰⁵ It also accustoms the audience to the idea that Jacob can recognize a divine messenger when he encounters one¹⁰⁶—even if that messenger should, for whatever reason, seem to oppose him.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, with Jacob’s own remark in verse 3, the parser is put on notice that his God is conducting ongoing, unspecified operations in the vicinity by means of these מְלָאָכִים mal’ākîm. They are among the local denizens—if not the only ones. It would therefore be even less of a surprise if the two parties should somehow meet again.

¹⁰⁴ Like many commentators as far back as Ibn Ezra (12th c.), Wenham (ad loc.) concludes that “Jacob is still being accompanied by God.” Luzzatto (ad loc.) specifies that the angels had been sent “in order to reassure [Jacob] so that he would not be afraid of his brother.” However, Ehrlich (ad loc.) casts doubt on such views by pointing out that Jacob’s panicked preparations soon afterward (vv. 8–22) suggest that he did not consider himself to be under the protection of these angels. In the Discussion, I will suggest an interpretation that reconciles these views.

¹⁰⁵ On priming, see Kahneman, *Thinking*, 52–58, 128. On surprise, see *ibid.*, 72–73: “A single incident may make a recurrence less surprising.” Kahneman explains that “the second abnormal event will retrieve the first one from memory, and both make sense together. The two events fit into a pattern.”

¹⁰⁶ When the narrator informs us that מְלָאָכִים אֱלֹהִים (“God’s messengers”) encounter Jacob (Gen 32:2), the audience is not told how he realized who their principal was. However, by his apparently immediate verbal response (v. 3), we can readily infer that he knew. Both the 12th-century commentator Joseph Bekhor Shor (on v. 3) and Bahya ben Asher (on v. 2) note that Jacob’s ability to recognize angels is salient here.

¹⁰⁷ Like many commentators, Wenham raises “the possibility that they [the angels in vv. 2–3] might be hostile (32:23–31).” For when the Hebrew Bible applies the verb פָּגַע *p-g-’ bə-* to a personal subject, it more often means “strike down (with a sword)” (e.g., Num. 35:12) than an innocent “encounter.” Both meanings make sense here upon first hearing, so the parser activates both of them (see above, note 62). Hence although the deity’s promise of protection makes an innocent meaning far more likely, even a hostile encounter would not be a complete surprise.

This expectation and accompanying frame are important because they condition the audience's interpretation of what follows. Furthermore, the very terseness of this passage predictably raises questions in the audience's mind:¹⁰⁸ *There must be a reason why you are telling us about these agents (beyond telling us how Mahanaim got its name)—what is it?* The implication is that they somehow relate to Jacob's story. Hence the audience's parser will be looking for clues to an answer that will render the overall narrative as coherent.

These questions remain open throughout verses 4–24, which concern Jacob's frenetic preparations for meeting up with his brother. Although on the surface this intervening passage seems unconnected to the previous one, it actually maintains the previously prompted questions. It does so by raising echoing queries of its own: *When Jacob twice dispatches his own מְלָאכִים mal'ākîm (messengers) to Esau (vv. 4–6, 14–22), what will come of those missions? What are the intentions toward Jacob of the story's other group of agents¹⁰⁹—namely, the four hundred אִישׁ 'îš (“agents”) who are reportedly approaching under Esau's direction (v. 7)?¹¹⁰ Agency is reiterated as a cognitive frame. Because of the questions on the table, these associative connections linger in the mental discourse model, even without the audience's conscious awareness of them.*

As we make our way through 32:4–24, dramatic tension grows. Panic drives Jacob to a whirl of activity. Meanwhile, the parser is thinking about the loose ends: *If Jacob is truly in mortal danger, Yahweh would be expected to intervene—given the previous promise of protection (28:15).¹¹¹ Well, what about those מְלָאכֵי אֱלֹהִים mal'ākê ʾēlōhîm (messengers of God) that Jacob saw nearby? Might they perhaps be a resource?*

¹⁰⁸ This follows from a maxim in pragmatics: when speakers or writers say something, the audience presumes that there is a communicative reason for their doing so. See above, notes 27 and 65.

¹⁰⁹ Medieval rabbinic plain-sense commentators noticed this question—and offered opposing answers. Kimḥi held that Esau was coming with a fighting force, ready for battle; Rashbam and Ḥizz'kuni held that Esau was honoring his brother with a huge welcoming party. Each interpretation could adduce other instances of the key verb as support. Thus the words of Jacob's מְלָאכִים as reported to the audience are ambiguous enough to carry forward the earlier narrative vagueness about the nature of the relationship between Jacob and his deity's מְלָאכִים.

¹¹⁰ These figures function as “agents” in that they are subordinated to Esau and serve his interests.

¹¹¹ That promise is salient for the parser because, as noted above, it was evoked again in 32:2–3, and meanwhile yet again in Jacob's prayer in vv. 10–13.

Agency is thus increasingly salient in the audience’s mind, while the מְלֹאכֵי אֱלֹהִים—who presumably remain in the vicinity—are still semi-active participants in the audience’s mental model of the story. And next, in 32:25, we are told simply:¹¹²

וַיֹּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ Jacob was left alone¹¹³

In light of the deity’s abiding promise of protection, the parser might well construe this clause ironically—for the מְלֹאכֵי אֱלֹהִים are not unexpected.¹¹⁴ And with that, the audience hears the next clause in the narrative:

וַיִּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֹלֹת הַשָּׁחַר: a _____ wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

This clause introduces a new participant into the discourse. Whenever the parser strives to make sense of such an introduction, it does so by considering three factors: the referring expression’s (semantic) content; the referent’s identifiability; and its cognitive accessibility as indicated by the manner in which the text refers to that referent.¹¹⁵ Let us examine each factor, in turn.

Regarding the *content* of the referring expression אִישׁ ’iš, my proposed sense as “agent” would make sense as a candidate, as with its plural in 18:2. This label seems to

¹¹² The text of this verse is stable for our purposes; the ancient witnesses do not attest any material variants.

¹¹³ Or: “Jacob alone was left” on this side of the divide (Daniel Shevitz, personal communication, 27 June 2018).

¹¹⁴ Expressed in terms of the conventions of Westerns (the American movie genre), the מְלֹאכֵי of verses 2–3 would be the cavalry who rides to the rescue of our beleaguered hero.

¹¹⁵ To suit the particulars of this situation, I have integrated four overlapping, cognitively based linguistic theories. See Ariel, “Accessibility Theory”; Chafe, *Discourse Consciousness and Time*; Heimerdinger, *Topic, Focus, and Foreground*, 134–153; and Lambrecht, *Information Structure and Sentence Form*. For a cogent discussion and application of these theories to biblical studies, see Westbury, “Left Dislocation in Biblical Hebrew,” 46–71.

be suited to this situation, as attested elsewhere in the Bible.¹¹⁶ Thus, the active cognitive frame of agency would tend to evoke the proposed “agent” sense of this noun.¹¹⁷

Regarding the referent’s *identifiability*, the issue is whether the parser has enough information to assign this reference to a unique participant.¹¹⁸ At first glance, the answer would appear to be no, because an indefinite noun merely focuses on the *class* to which its referent belongs.¹¹⁹ However, in the present context, this referent is in fact unique. Nobody else is on the scene with whom this newly introduced figure might be confused. Moreover, he is the only character described as being saliently engaged with Jacob.

As for the referent’s *accessibility*, the parser relies in part on the *form* of the referring expression. It considers two features of that form.¹²⁰ First, *how phonologically complex is it?* In this case, not very complex; **אִישׁ** is one of the simplest nouns to pronounce. And second, *how informative is it?* In this case, not very informative. True, this label does tell us more about the referent than, say, a pronoun would; but less than either a more specific label, such as **מַלְאָךְ** *mal’āk*, or one that anchored the referent to an existing character, such as **מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים** *mal’ak ’ēlōhîm* (messenger/angel of God).

Taken together, the referring expression’s features indicate that the text treats this participant as *fairly accessible* in the audience’s mind.¹²¹ This gives the parser a clue: this character is already activated and lurking somewhere in the discourse model, in a semi-active state. The parser searches its discourse model accordingly, to find the best fit.

¹¹⁶ When human agents are dispatched *to apply force or coercion*, they can be designated as **אִישׁ** (Josh 2:3–7; Jer 26:22–23); and that term also applies to such a role in co-reference with **מַלְאָךְ** *mal’āk* (Gen 19; 2 Kgs 6:32).

From a canonical viewpoint, the figure labeled as **אִישׁ** in this story could be construed as a “messenger” also on the basis of his designation as such (**מַלְאָךְ** *mal’āk*) in Hosea 12:4. However, one could object that Hosea might represent a different tradent regarding Jacob’s experiences, such that the Genesis narrative must be read on its own terms alone. Even so, if my hypothesis is correct, the present narrative in effect presents the same information as Hosea does.

¹¹⁷ If 32:25 were taken in isolation, the meaning contribution of **אִישׁ** would be construed as something other than “agent(s).” Much as with **אֲנָשִׁים** in 18:2, what evokes an “agency” sense of **אִישׁ** here is the incremental, contextually sensitive, and predictively oriented nature of online language processing, as it encounters the unfolding discourse.

¹¹⁸ Chafe, *Discourse Consciousness*, 93–101.

¹¹⁹ IBHS, 236 (§ 13.2.b).

¹²⁰ Ariel, “Accessibility Theory,” 16.

¹²¹ According to the linguist Mira Ariel (*ibid.*), a referent’s accessibility is *inversely proportional* to its initial designation’s complexity and informativity. Inaccessible referents need a lot of description.

Within my existing discourse model, what choices are available? The parser’s question points to the other aspect of accessibility that it considers: the *source* of access.¹²² A participant’s advent on the scene can sometimes be *inferred* from other information already present in the model. One way that the specific presence of this figure labeled as אִישׁ ’iš can be accessed is if he is somehow associated with another, more active entity.¹²³ In this case, there are two such entities (from v. 2)—namely the מְלֹאכֵי אֱלֹהִים *mal’ākê ʾēlōhîm* and the deity whom they serve. Happily, the parser knows how to activate an individual discourse participant who happens to be a member of an already identifiable group¹²⁴—which in this case is the מְלֹאכֵי אֱלֹהִים. This אִישׁ is thus identified as one of them.¹²⁵ As a member of that group, he has been potentially available all along. Presumably Yahweh has now tasked him with this particular mission (whatever it may be).

In other words, the noun אִישׁ plausibly takes on the contextual sense of “an agent (specifically, one of those who were spotted earlier).” Nonetheless, the parser weighs this lexical choice against known alternatives. So let us consider the most obvious one, which is the singular form of the label that was applied at the start of this episode (v. 2): מְלֹאךְ. What if it had been used again in verse 25?

*וַיִּאָבֵק מְלֹאךְ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

*a messenger wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

If this had been the word choice, the parser would readily conclude that Yahweh dispatched the intruder, based on the existing prediction that the deity is about to intervene.¹²⁶ And the new figure would be readily activated in the parser’s discourse model, as the member of an already identifiable group. At the same time, the parser would construe his label as conspicuous (marked), because it is more specific

¹²² Lambrecht, *Information Structure*, 100.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Such a participant is activated via an associative process (metonymy) that links wholes with their parts. Alternatively, some linguists, drawing upon mathematics, would classify the referent as inferable based on its membership in a contextually licensed Partially Ordered Set Relation (“poset”); for “is-a-member-of” is seen as one of those suitable relations (Ward and Birner, “Discourse and Information Structure”).

¹²⁵ It may be relevant that in a group context, the noun אִישׁ—even in indefinite usage—often means “a member” of that group, e.g., Num 15:32, and in its frequently distributive and reciprocal usages. See my article “The Noun אִישׁ.”

¹²⁶ Elsewhere when agents are dispatched to apply force or coercion against someone, מְלֹאךְ *mal’āk* is one of the designations for such agents (see above, note 116); see also 1 Sam 19:11, 14–15, 20–21.

(informative) than necessary. As in 18:2, the fact that he is on a mission is already inferable from the situation, so the parser would wonder: *Why are you going out of your way to tell me that he is a messenger?*¹²⁷ In other words, the use of מְלָאָךְ would complicate the picture somewhat.¹²⁸

In light of the marked alternative label, a parser of the actual biblical text would conclude that its composer(s) preferred to use the unmarked—and therefore expected—designation, אִישׁ.¹²⁹ That is, rather than raising a new question, the text simply answers four existing ones: (1) Where did this apparently new party come from? (2) How is it that this party’s initial label is straightaway the subject of an action verb?¹³⁰ (3) How does Yahweh fulfill the abiding promise to protect Jacob from harm? (4) Why did the text tell us earlier about God’s messengers (vv. 2–3)?

Another way to state the situation is that the referent of אִישׁ is construed as filling a perceived void in the story.¹³¹ Maintaining that void up until this point has required mental processing effort. Now, by slotting the new referent into the existing void, the overall processing effort drops.

In short, given the parser’s commitment to coherent-and-informative interpretations, it would immediately recognize that this אִישׁ who suddenly appears on the scene is Yahweh’s agent on a mission. Because it *could* come to this conclusion, it *would* reliably do so. And as discussed above, the parser would then be content to disregard an OO construal.

¹²⁷ For the ancient audience, the label would presumably evoke one of the qualities conventionally associated with מְלָאָכִי אֱלֹהִים, such as succor (Gen 24:40), power (Exod 23:20), discernment (2 Sam 14:17), cleverness (ibid., 20), or destructiveness (ibid. 24:16).

¹²⁸ Likewise for an even more explicit and phonologically complex label such as מֵהַמְּלָאָכִים * * אִישׁ *mē-hammal’ākīm* “a member of the [group of] messengers”: such an expression would be construed as needlessly prolix (overencoding) and thus bearing an additional connotation.

¹²⁹ We can also ask: what if גִּבֹּר *geber* (“man, gentleman, noble”) had been used as the label in 32:25? The parser would consider it to be puzzling. Semantically speaking, it would be a surprise in terms of expectation: *Why would Yahweh bother to send a “man,” when “messengers” were already on hand?* It would also be odd in terms of its inaccessibility in the discourse, for the term is both somewhat complex to pronounce and fairly informative. (It denotes a male who acts upon or in the world; a גִּבֹּר is not passive, depressed, ill, disabled, or feeble; see Kosmala, “גִּבֹּר *gebher*.”) It would indicate that its referent has not been previously active in the discourse model. In short, the label גִּבֹּר would only add to the passage’s list of open questions—and processing costs.

¹³⁰ As discussed above at note 96. The answer is that the label refers to someone who is already present—albeit obliquely—in the discourse model, as expected.

¹³¹ In the terminology of discourse analysis, the referent is contextually highly salient.

Meanwhile, the situation would be judged on the basis of the parser’s conclusion that this intruder has arrived so as to protect Jacob from harm. If that already panicked fellow were led to think that some *unknown stranger* is suddenly interfering in his affairs, his panic would only increase—which would be counterproductive. Thus Jacob clearly has a *need to know* the identity of the principal who dispatched this agent. Meanwhile, the RR convention applies to any agent whose designated activity involves a recipient with a need to know.¹³² So for the parser, this condition would marshal the RR convention.

Consequently, it would go without saying that Jacob recognizes the sender’s identity.¹³³ And so, even though narrative clouds of dust continue to obscure certain details of the struggle, the parser would conclude that the characters’ identities are clearly visible to each other, even at night.¹³⁴

Discussion

The parser emulation method employed here may be too painstaking an approach to apply widely. Actual language processing handles more associated bits of information than researchers can readily track consciously and commit to writing. Yet this seems to be a worthwhile method to apply to longstanding interpretive cruxes—much as special medical treatments are administered to desperately ill patients.

¹³² Thus the RR convention extends to messengers who perform certain tasks *aside from* message delivery (the task considered earlier). It applies, for example, to cases of summoning, interrogation, or detention.

¹³³ The fact that Jacob has demonstrated his ability to recognize his deity’s מְלֹאֲכִים *mal’ākīm* (v. 3) likewise suggests that he would recognize the deity’s אִישׁ *’iš* (v. 25). See above, note 106. However, this consideration is not decisive, given that the earlier perception took place during the daytime.

¹³⁴ Coincident narrative details, as well as subsequent ones, would then be interpreted in light of this awareness. These include: (1) *The struggle takes place at night*. Nighttime is simply the time when everyone (including Jacob) knows that spiritual experiences and crises are the most likely to occur, and when one typically gains perspective on the events of the preceding day. (2) *A conflict of wills is underway*. The agent, who presumably possesses supernatural strength, must not be attempting to subjugate or harm Jacob, but rather to manage or pacify him. The presumed mission of protection quickly appears to be a matter of restraint (in both senses of that term). See further below, note 139. (3) *Jacob persists even while knowing that he is battling a divine agent*. He remains desperate and panicked—stuck in survival mode. (4) *Jacob inquires about the agent’s “name” as a matter of clarification*. Because each of a deity’s various names reflects a particular attribute or manifestation, asking the name of a divine being is a succinct way to clarify *which of those* is most salient in this encounter. Compare Kimḥi’s comment (v. 30) that Jacob posed his question “in order to know what he [the angel] was tasked to do” (לְדַעַת עַל אִיזָה דְבַר הוּא מִמוֹנָה); Naḥmanides at Exod 3:13, on Moses’s similar question at the burning bush; John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 52. (The angel’s response to Jacob is then a coy challenge: “Do you really have to ask? Don’t you know by now?”)

According to my reconstruction, the ancient audience’s parser navigates among the narrator-created expectations and existing social and narrative conventions. In so doing, it finds a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Hence it quickly assembles a coherent and informative construal of both of the passages under study. It does so without conscious reflection or mental effort. Like all plain-sense construals, this one arises from an associative and predictive meaning-making process. The result is a “recipient recognition” (RR) construal in both cases.

What about the OO construal? If it is not the text’s plain sense, then what is it? By definition, it is midrash—being a construal that dramatically removes the text from its *context*.¹³⁵ That is, it ignores the audience’s familiarity with their own society’s thorough reliance upon agency (a reliance that had produced the RR convention). It also replaces the contextual meaning of the Niphal **רָאָה** *r-’-h* verb and the noun **אֵיִשׁ** *’iš* with mechanical and acontextual ones. Furthermore, the OO construal detaches the text from its co-text, namely Jacob’s prior encounter with his deity’s messengers shortly before he is detained by one of them.

Now, a midrashic reading is not necessarily less valuable or valid than the plain sense. The general notion that people do not recognize God’s operation in their lives right away is still instructive.¹³⁶ Furthermore, if we perceive Abraham as having shown unusually gracious hospitality to his unidentified visitors, there is stirring ethical guidance.¹³⁷ And in the conventional claim that both Abraham and Jacob passed a test and thus earned their deity’s abiding favor, there is comfort for their spiritual descendants. All of these are ancient interpretations with enduring power and popularity.

Compelling midrash is fashioned precisely from readings that ignore context, because doing so engenders a memorable, mind-bending surprise and even delight for the audience. *We cannot truly appreciate midrashists’ skill unless we first comprehend the*

¹³⁵ “Midrash” is a genre of rabbinic interpretation; it is the fruit of an *acontextual* mode of construal that “disregards the constrictions of the historical, literary, and linguistic conditions in which the text first came to us” (Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” 220).

¹³⁶ “The theological claim of delayed recognition is a significant trope in theophany narratives, and one of the devices for delay is the gradual revelation of the Deity in the eyes of the recipient” (George Savran, personal communication, 1 Nov. 2015).

¹³⁷ The genre of midrash seems to apply to the famous teaching in Hebrews 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (NRSV). Presumably the allusion in the plural “some” is to Abraham in Gen 18:1–15 and to Lot in 19:2–3 (when he invites two angels into his household in Sodom). However, on a plain-sense level, the RR convention applies to both passages (contra Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 160).

plain sense that they are departing from. If we conflate plain-sense and midrashic interpretation, we lose perspective on the often-impressive creativity (and sometimes playfulness) behind the latter. The result is akin to our reading a sonnet as if it were prose, disregarding its iambic pentameter and its rhymes. We miss a lot that way.

Having shown the text's plain sense (in the ancient audience's eyes) to be that both Abraham and Jacob recognize right away that their respective אֱנָשִׁים *ānāšîm* represent Yahweh, we now face an interesting question: How does this construal affect our explanation of each story's meaning—and our understanding of how the Bible's God interacts with humankind? An RR construal of our two Genesis passages can yield remarkable insights in its own right, as the following tentative explorations will demonstrate.¹³⁸

What Do We Make of Sarah's Dissembling?

In the exchange about Sarah's laughter (18:11–15), if we understand that she—like her husband—was already aware that she was conversing with an agent of her deity, this casts her dissembling (v. 15) in a less harsh light. She was afraid, but not because she was startled by this stranger's knowledge about her inner thoughts. (As an agent of the divine, his possessing that ability would not be so surprising; cf. Elisha's remark in 2 Kgs 4:27.) Rather, having at first entertained reasonable doubts as to whether the announced promise of progeny was realistic (v. 12), Sarah then began to fret that those very doubts might ironically cause that promise—which she has so deeply longed for—not to come true. *Fear is the flip side of daring to hope.* Thus we see in this encounter a poignant depiction of Sarah's very human reaction to wondrous news from a gracious deity.

Why Did Yahweh Send an Angel to Jacob?

In Gen 32:25 ff., what motivated the angel to struggle with Jacob in the first place? Presumably this messenger had been dispatched by the deity to carry out a mission. What was the nature of that mission? Once we adopt the plain-sense view that Jacob would of course immediately recognize this angel as such, it opens up the possibility that this story depicts neither a test nor a contest, but rather a *loving intervention*.

¹³⁸ Making online sense of a narrative (the subject of this article until now) yields a more sure-fire outcome than does reflecting on that story's theological import (which I am about to do). Theological interpretation involves more variables, and our knowledge of the ancient audience's assumptions is less certain. The boundaries of the relevant context are less clear—especially when Yahweh has been depicted only indirectly, as in these stories. Hence the following interpretations are more speculative than my preceding analysis of the parser's operation. In other words, theological interpretations other than those offered here may well lay an equal claim to reflecting the meaning of the narrative's plain sense.

After all, Jacob's ongoing panic and his frenetic behavior were showing no sign of abating. The apparent goal of the intervention could have been, via a kind of "tough love," to enable Jacob to get a grip on himself—to restore his sense of perspective, and his awareness of divine protection.¹³⁹

A model for understanding this intervention is the situation of a loving adult who holds a child while the latter works through an earlier terrifying experience. The adult's embrace can give the child something safe to struggle against. In my own experience, this is a profound way for human beings to recover from their fears. To describe that process in more detail, it will be instructive to quote from a parenting expert's guidelines for assisting a child to recover from fear. The following is introduced as "the basic information you need once your child has cried out in her fear and you have arrived to help."¹⁴⁰

Hold your child close, and be sure that she can see you fully when she chooses. A terrified child needs you close.... Stay close, even if your child struggles to fight you off. Your child's fear must have a focus in order for the healing process to work.... As you move close to try to help your child may begin to push you away, transferring her feelings of fear onto you.... You are close enough, safe enough, dedicated enough to stand by her while she fights against whatever force once frightened her into submission. If you allow her to struggle, cry and tremble, ... you speed her recovery from that terror.... Continue to move toward embracing your child.... The longer

¹³⁹ This is akin to the views of Rashbam and of Kimḥi (both at 32:25) that God sent the angel to *detain* Jacob—who was terrified and wanted to flee—in order to "strengthen his resolve, so as to not be scared of Esau." The verb of encounter in vv. 25–26, normally rendered as "wrestled," is extant nowhere else in ancient Hebrew, so its precise force is not clear. Several plain-sense rabbinic commentators (Rashi, Bekhor Shor, Bahya ben Asher, and Luzzatto) favor a meaning closer to "hugged," based on a plausible Aramaic cognate (assuming a well-known type of interchange of guttural letters) attested in the Talmud. Whatever the denoted activity was, it led to Jacob's injury, which suggests that he was resisting physically. Even so, Rashbam and Kimḥi plausibly hold that the angel's intent was not to harm Jacob, so much as to prevent him from following his impulse to flee in terror from his brother. Three facts together support their interpretation: Jacob's injury was not inflicted right away; it was of a temporary nature; and it specifically precluded running. (Presumably an angel would be able to inflict damage in accord with Yahweh's wish, which implies that an intent to harm would have resulted in an immediate maiming—and not necessarily involving a leg.) These factors confirm some kind of protective restraint.

¹⁴⁰ Patty Wipfler, *Listening to Children: Healing Children's Fears* (Palo Alto, CA: Parents Leadership Institute, 1990), 4–10. In the inside cover of this pamphlet, the author explains her choice of pronouns: "To simplify the text, 'she' is used in this article to represent children of both genders."

your child struggles, trembles, cries and perspires, the clearer it will become that she is working through past fears....

After working through fears, children need time to rearrange their perceptions of the world again. It looks and feels like a different place now that there is less to fear.

According to my proposal, then, the biblical episode is not about Jacob's winning or losing a wrestling match. It is not about victory or defeat. Rather, it is a matter of enabling him—as someone who is overwhelmed by fear and guilt—to come to his senses. This is what God's protection looks like. This is the divine embrace.

Summary of Approach

Through the centuries, a minority of exegetes have asserted that either Abraham or Jacob recognized their deity's involvement right away—although proponents of this view are seldom cited in contemporary scholarly literature. In this article, I compiled the linguistic usage data and cognitive motivations that can account for the minority interpretation. Furthermore, I contended that this view, which I have called the RR construal, is not only plausible but also superior to the OO construal—in that it quickly yields a coherent and informative text.

In order to answer an apparently simple question about two short biblical passages (27 words total), I needed to account for a large number of factors. Consequently, I drew upon the insights and methods of scholars from many disciplines beyond biblical studies: ancient Near Eastern studies, cognitive linguistics (which includes some of the following), cognitive psychology, cognitive science, cognitive semantics, computational linguistics, discourse linguistics (textlinguistics), information theory, lexicography, literary theory, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, reader-response theory, and relevance theory.

A key factor turned out to be the concept of the cognitive script, which I applied to ancient Near Eastern messaging. Among other things, that script licensed the “recipient recognition” (RR) convention in the construal of narrative depictions of messaging.

Another key factor was the concept of a mental “discourse model.” Related to this was the parser, a model that emulates several aspects about the human mind: its relentless search for coherence (patterns) in whatever it encounters; its expectation that communication will be informative; and its incremental and expectation-based (predictive) approach to language processing.

A third key factor was a cognitively informed analysis of the meaning potential and the conditions of usage of a significant verb and a significant noun. I posited an unusual view of **שִׂי** *š* provisionally, in order to test its explanatory power.

A fourth key factor was a careful consideration, based on discourse considerations, of the boundaries of the two texts and of the contexts in which they would be construed.

With those keys in hand, I analyzed the two passages in question.

Conclusions

Methodological Conclusions

- Consideration of cognition (in particular, of how the messaging script is deployed) can shift the burden of proof regarding the meaning of facts that are conspicuous by their absence. This approach highlights the audience's reliable expectations—which, in turn, presumably shaped their construal of the depicted events.
- By construing the text incrementally and in terms of expectations/predictions, we can assess the impact of the narrator's choice of labels for certain participants.

Substantive Conclusions

- Biblical narrative regularly relies upon cognitive scripts in order to depict its scenes concisely. It can depend upon the audience's mind to automatically fill in the gaps.
- Precisely because the recipient's identification of a messenger as the sender's agent was a *normal* and well-known part of the ancient messaging script, the biblical text could omit its mention—as long as the text's audience already knew the sender's identity. This situation of shared knowledge (based upon the mind's affinity for metonymy) then licensed a narrative convention for depicting messaging between people.
- The text's composer(s) had ample reason to rely upon the audience to imagine that during the two episodes in question, both Abraham and Jacob knew *from the start* that they were dealing with Yahweh's messengers. This would explain why those patriarchs' recognition went without saying in the remainder of their respective stories.
- The verb **רָאָה** *r'-h* in the Niphal stem is almost always used in a communication context; it usually denotes the advent of a communication event.
- This study validates the hypothesis that the noun **שִׂי** *š* can denote an “agent” in agency situations. It has leveraged that notion in order to resolve two major interpretive cruxes in the book of Genesis.

- This study also resolved a crux as to the subtle role of 32:2–3 in the larger narrative of Jacob’s return to Canaan: it sets up expectations that are crucial to understanding what follows in 32:25 ff.
- At least in these three passages, the plain sense of the biblical text seems to be more coherent and informative than many scholars have given it credit for.
- Theologians’ presupposition that *recognizing God’s involvement is difficult* appears to be at odds with the text’s plain sense in these two passages. Here, it results in midrash.
- In order to truly appreciate midrashic interpretations, we must first comprehend the plain sense that it is departing from.
- If we accept the text’s implication that Abraham and Jacob recognized who they were dealing with, it significantly alters the narratives’ theological import. A deity that had seemed enigmatic and even cruel can instead be construed as loyal and supportive.

[END]

Excursus 1: מְלָאָךְ *Mal’āk* and Its Co-referential Role Terms

The Bible repeatedly uses the term מְלָאָךְ *mal’āk* (“messenger”) in co-reference with other role terms. To give six examples:

- The two sets of מְלָאָכִים *mal’ākîm* whom King Balak sends to Balaam (Num 22:4–5; 24:12) are also labeled as זְקֵנִים *zəqēnîm* (“elders”; 22:7), אַנְשֵׁים *’ānāšîm* (“agents” [see Excursus 10]; vv. 9, 20), שָׂרִים *śārîm* (“dignitaries”; vv. 13–14, 15, 21, 35), and עֲבָדִים *’ăbādîm* (“royal officials”; v. 18).
- The אַנְשֵׁים whom Joshua sends to Jericho (Josh 2:1–4, 9, 14, 17, 23) are also labeled as מְלָאָכִים after their mission is complete (6:17, 25).
- The נְעָרִים *nə’ārîm* (“protégés”) whom the fugitive David sends to Nabal (1 Sam 25:5, 8, 9, 12) are also labeled as עֲבָדֵי דָוִד *’abdē dāwid* (“David’s servants”; v. 10) before being called מְלָאָכִים by Abigail’s servant (v. 14) and then נְעָרִים again by her (v. 25).
- The עֲבָדֵי דָוִד whom David sends to Abigail (1 Sam 25:40) are later called מְלָאָכֵי דָוִד *mal’ākê dāwid* (“David’s messengers”) by the same narrator (v. 42).
- During Jehu’s coup d’état against King Joram of Israel, the king orders that a רֶכֶב *rakkāb* (“horseman”) be dispatched (2 Kgs 9:17). Two parties then called רֶכֶב הַסּוּס *rokēb hassūs* (“horse rider”) by the narrator (vv. 18, 19) are each designated as הַמְלָאָךְ *hammal’āk* (“the messenger”) by the lookout who reports on their progress to the king (vv. 18, 20).

- The מְלֶאכִים whom King David sends to Ammon (1 Chr 19:2) are also labeled as עֲבָדָי דָּוִד (“David’s servants”; vv. 2, 4) and as אַנְשֵׁים (“agents”; v. 5 *bis*).

The Bible’s regular use of alternative messenger designations undercuts a terminological conclusion put forth by James Kugel, who reasoned that “if an angel were . . . a real *messenger* of God, then every angel would no doubt be called an angel consistently” (*The God of Old*, 34). On the contrary, “real messengers” were often designated by various labels—and this appears to have been conventional practice.

Excursus 2: The Cognitive Entrenchment of Messaging

In deriving the RR convention, I did not rely solely on biblical evidence. Another touchstone was recent scholarship on the role of messengers in the ancient Near East.¹⁴¹ This addressed the potential objection that the social world of the Bible might not reflect the historical world of ancient Israel—and therefore not be a reliable guide to the “reading” conventions of the text’s audience.

Messaging commonplaces that are evident from the biblical descriptions of the interactions among its *human* characters are remarkably consistent with extrabiblical evidence such as the Mari archives, correspondence from Ugarit, the El Amarna Letters, Hebrew ostraca, and the Elephantine papyri—all of which deal with messaging. Indeed, the commonplaces that are evident in the Bible match the standard practices across the ancient Near East over roughly *two millennia*. As John Greene concluded, “the understanding of what a messenger was, and how messengers functioned in the ancient Near East was exactly the same as that mirrored in the historical narrative material of the Hebrew Scriptures.”¹⁴²

In addition to being widespread across numerous lands and many centuries, the messaging commonplaces were well known. Again, as Greene concluded: “Messengers were ubiquitous throughout this area [the ancient Near East]; they were an integral part of

¹⁴¹ In chronological order: Munn-Rankin, “Diplomacy” (1956); Crown, “Tidings and Instructions” (1974); Holmes, “Messengers of the Amarna Letters” (1975); Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World* (1988); Greene, *Role of the Messenger* (1989); Beitzel, “Travel and Communication” (1992); Matthews, “Messengers in the Mari Kingdom” (1996); Conrad, “Messengers” (2000); Malamat, “Provisioning of Messengers” (2003); Bryce, “Letters and Messengers” (2004); Fox, *Message from the Great King* (2015).

¹⁴² Greene, *Role of the Messenger*, 134.

its warp and woof. They were there in all aspects of its social, political and religious life. They were there in all types of literature.”¹⁴³

Due to its familiarity, the biblical composers could rely upon messaging to depict spiritual experience in a readily understandable manner. And what did the messaging motif help them to convey? Within the extended metaphor of divine personification, it offered a realistic depiction of human experience: religiously oriented human beings nearly always experience God’s caring and commitment via third parties whom we construe as agents of the divine—much like seeing divinity only out of the corner of our eye—and sometimes only in retrospect. Rather than glimpsing God directly, we tend to receive indirect messages.

Excursus 3: Elision in Biblical Depictions of Messaging

As noted in the main article, when biblical narrators describe a human principal’s dispatch of a messenger, the verb שלח *š-l-ḥ* (“sent”) or קרא *q-r-*’ (“summoned”) is often used with an elided direct object; thus the messengers’ very existence is assumed—not to mention their successful discharge of the mission (e.g., Gen 12:18; 27:42; 38:25; Josh 11:1). Equally compressed depictions describe only a message’s dictation (Exod 18:6;¹⁴⁴ 2 Kgs 3:7b), or its delivery (Josh 10:17), or its receipt (Gen 34:5–7), or only the initial order and its end result (2 Kgs 6:13); or the notice of a dispatch followed by the end result (Exod 9:7; 1 Sam 5:8, 11; 2 Sam 11:3).

In biblical narrative, when Yahweh operates via a *human* agent, the depiction of the dispatching stages is not uncommon (e.g., Moses in Exod 9:13; Samuel in 1 Sam 16:1–3; the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 12:24b–25). In contrast, when Yahweh operates via a *divine* agent, only rarely do we find explicit predication of the dispatching stages in narrative passages.¹⁴⁵ As for poetic passages, the deity’s dispatch of divine agents tends to be mentioned in generic or indefinite fashion, e.g., Isa 41:27; Pss 91:11; 103:20; 104:4. In other words, for Yahweh the classical messaging steps of selecting, commissioning, and instructing the divine agents all tend to go without saying.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁴ The Septuagint and Syriac versions reflect a different verb of speaking.

¹⁴⁵ Exceptions include Job 1:6–12 and 2:1–6, which function to make it clear that *Yhwh* and the *śatan* are distinct entities; and so also 1 Kings 22:22, in a prophet’s vision regarding *Yhwh* and a *ruaḥ šeqer*.

In short, with regard to Israel’s deity, the Bible applies the messaging motif mostly to *the human experience of message reception, and to the experience of being called to God’s service*. Arguably the focus is more phenomenological than theological.

Excursus 4: The Keen Interest in Establishing an Interlocutor’s Affiliation

In ancient Israel’s group-oriented society, the need to quickly establish a stranger’s main affiliations—and thus their loyalties—apparently was of keen interest.¹⁴⁶

The biblical narratives reflect this reality consistently. For example, Jacob presumed that when his brother Esau would come upon a shepherd who is driving a flock directly toward him, his first question would be “Whose (מִי לַמִּי) are you?”—that is, with whom are you affiliated (Gen 32:18). Similarly, when David’s band came across a forlorn and hapless Egyptian in the wilderness (1 Sam 30:11), the first question that David asked him was “Whose (מִי) are you?” (v. 13). And when Boaz first spotted a stranger gleaning in his field, his first question to his supervisor was “Whose (מִי) protégée is that?” (Ruth 2:5).

Even when the interrogative pronoun used in biblical dialogue is simply מִי *mī* (literally “who”), the question can really be about the stranger’s affiliation, as reflected by the answer offered in 2 Kgs 10:13. And as Arnold Ehrlich noted, if the query is being posed about an *agent*, it is understood to actually be asking about the *principal’s* identity.¹⁴⁷ That this was the intent—and that it went without saying—is again evident from the answers given (Num 22:9–11; Josh 9:8–11).

Excursus 5: Ancient Near Eastern Messengers’ Prompt Identification of Their Principal

A protocol that messengers promptly self-identify in terms of their principal is known throughout the ancient Near East (apart from the Bible). Here are three examples.

- An emissary sent by King Shulgi of Sumer (fl. 2000 BCE) wrote back to his master to report a breach of protocol: “When I came to the gate of the palace, no one took notice of *the greetings of my king* [i.e., the greetings that I extended in your name]; those who were sitting did not rise [and] did not bow down.” In other words, it was customary for

¹⁴⁶ McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*, 78; Meyers, “Family in Early Israel,” 21–22; Van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 3, 374.

¹⁴⁷ *Miqrā’ Ki-pšūtō*, at Num 22:9.

an emissary to begin by announcing whom he was representing, and to bear greetings from the principal.¹⁴⁸

- Mari’s resident ambassador in Babylon (ca. 2000 BCE) gave an account of the arrival of a messenger from his city, whom he accompanied. It began with a formal announcement of the messenger’s arrival: “We entered the presence of [the king]. The salutation and the verbal commission [credentials] were made [known]. We went out.” He goes on to say that it was not until evening that he actually delivered the content of the message itself.¹⁴⁹
- The Babylonian tale “The Poor Man of Nippur” depicts a wronged fellow who exacts revenge from a more powerful figure by pretending to be a royal messenger. His arrival is greeted by a question: “Who are you, my lord...?” Tellingly, the imposter replies in terms of his claimed authority, by identifying his principal: “The king—your lord—sent me, to...”¹⁵⁰ This stratagem presupposes such a practice of identification among royal messengers. Furthermore, this convention must have been known to the text’s audience, in order for the ruse to have seemed plausible.

Excursus 6: Explicit Mention of Announcing the Sender’s Identity

In several instances, biblical narratives mention a step in the messaging script that (I have argued) normally went without saying: *Announce your sender’s identity*. Here I account for these apparent exceptions.

One of the rare passages that makes it explicit is 1 Sam 25:40:¹⁵¹

וַיָּבֹאוּ עֲבָדֵי דָוִד אֶל-אַבְיָגַיִל הַכַּרְמֶלָה	David’s servants came to Abigail at Carmel;
וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלֶיהָ לֵאמֹר	they spoke to her, saying:
דָּוִד שְׁלָחָנוּ אֵלֶיךָ	“David sent us to you—
לְקַחְתֶּךָ לְאִשָּׁה:	to make you his wife.”

¹⁴⁸ Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 137–138; emphasis added.

¹⁴⁹ Munn-Rankin, “Diplomacy in Western Asia,” 102–103.

¹⁵⁰ Foster, *Before the Muses*, 831, ll. 87–91 (punctuation adapted).

¹⁵¹ The text of this passage is stable; no significant variant readings are extant.

Unconventionally, as David’s messengers report to Abigail his directive to them, they are speaking *about* him.¹⁵² Moreover, as they make that statement, it really functions as a question: Do you agree to be David’s wife? That they convey their master’s proposal in this unusual and oblique way can be explained as a matter of adroit deference: it would allow Abigail to decline David’s offer without embarrassment to either party.¹⁵³

The *Announce your sender’s identity* step finds mention also in the few cases where the storytelling spotlights a prior step in the messaging script: *Receive and memorize the dictated message*. In these cases, senders—while instructing their messenger—insist that their identity be announced “up front.” For example, earlier in the same episode, in 1 Sam 25:5–6, David instructs a different set of messengers to state promptly in whose name their message is being delivered, before relating its content:¹⁵⁴

וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד עֶשְׂרֵה נְעָרִים	David dispatched ten protégés;
וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד לְנְעָרִים	David instructed these protégés:
עֲלוּ בְרִמְלָה וּבְאֵתֶם אֶל-נָבָל	“Go up to Carmel [until] you come to Nabal.
וּשְׁאַלְתֶּם-לוֹ בְּשֵׁמִי לְשָׁלוֹם:	Extend greetings to him <i>in my name</i> .
וְאָמַרְתֶּם . . .	And say . . .”

Likewise, Gen 32:5; 45:9; and Exod 3:13 provide a glimpse of another step in the messaging script: *Receive the message*. In all four cases, however, a compelling dramatic reason exists for the unusual mention of this stage. In our example above (1 Sam 25), a narrative focus on David’s calculated planning of this mission prompts the audience to experience his vulnerability (which then helps us to understand the depth of his reaction to Nabal’s insult—which in turn explains his intention to commit slaughter); in Gen 32, it prompts the audience to experience Jacob’s vulnerability as he starts to face his brother’s potential wrath; in Gen 45, it underscores Joseph’s newly found resolve to finally contact his father after so many years of silence; and in Exod 3 it creates the opening to further unfold the theological import of Moses’ momentous commission. These are poignant moments.

¹⁵² According to narrative convention, the messengers speak *for* their principal. As Cynthia Miller notes, when a message is introduced with the complementizer לְאָמַר *lē’mōr* (as here), the narration may even present the messenger as speaking from the sender’s perspective (“the pronouns index the principal of the speech event rather than its animator”; *Representation of Speech*, 379).

¹⁵³ On the deferential import of couching a request as a declarative clause, see Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 298–301.

¹⁵⁴ The text of this passage is stable for our purposes, in terms of extant ancient variants. (In verse 5, a Qumran manuscript shows a different preposition than appears in the Masoretic text.)

Excursus 7: More Elision of a Recipient’s Recognition of a Messenger’s Principal

Joshua 2:3–7 begins:

וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכָיו יְרִיחוֹ אֶל־רַחַב לֵאמֹר
 הוֹצִיָאִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הַבָּאִים אֵלֶיךָ . . .
Wayyišlah melek yəriḥō ‘el-rāḥāb lē’mōr:
hōšī’î ha-’ānāšîm ha-bā’îm ‘ēlayik . . .

The king of Jericho sent [deputies] to Rahab, saying:

“Bring out the agents¹⁵⁵ who came to you . . .”).

This passage exemplifies a typical formula: *wayyišlah* [*pālōnî*] . . . *lē’mōr* (“[so-and-so] sent [someone] . . . to convey the following [message]”—that is, using 3rd-person singular (or plural) references to a principal whose identity is *known* to the text’s audience). This construction is used forty times to depict human-to-human messaging.¹⁵⁶ In the narratives that employ this formula, the message’s recipients *always* promptly act as though they know who sent it. Yet the means by which they gained that awareness is *never* stated—either by the narrator or in the message content as quoted. Rather, it goes without saying, for the audience can infer it via the evoked messaging script.

For additional cases in which the text’s audience must assume that the recipient is aware of the sender’s identity, consider the messengers who are dispatched to *bring a particular person back* to the principal: In Gen 20:2, how do Abraham and his wife Sarah know that the messengers who suddenly show up to take her away were sent by King Abimelech? In 2 Sam 3:15, how do Paltiel and his wife Michal know that the messenger(s) who show up to take her away were sent by King Ish-boshet? In 2 Sam 11:4 and 11:27, how does Bathsheba know that the messengers who show up to take her away were sent by King David? In all of these cases, it goes without saying that the recipients were aware that the messengers were acting upon royal authority, so that no one would construe their action as kidnapping and put up resistance.

The main exception that proves the rule may be the well-known, so-called messenger formula [פֹּלְגִי אָמַר כֹּה בַּה *kōh ‘āmar* [*pālōnî*] (“Thus says [so-and-so]”). As with all other aspects of the messaging process, this formula is depicted in only a minority of the messaging instances in which it presumably would have been employed. But why

¹⁵⁵ On this sense, see below, Excursus 10.

¹⁵⁶ See Num 21:21; 22:5; Josh 10:3–4; 10:6; Jud 9:31; 11:12, 17; 16:18; 20:12; 1 Sam 6:21; 16:22; 2 Sam 3:12, 14; 13:7; 15:10; 1 Kgs 5:16, 22; 12:3; 15:18; 21:14; 2 Kgs 3:7; 5:8, 10; 6:9; 10:1, 5; 14:9; 16:7; 18:14; 19:9; Isa 37:9; Jer 36:14; 37:3; Amos 7:10; Neh 6:2; 2 Chr 2:2; 16:2; 25:17, 18; 35:21.

does the text sometimes state this formula in the reported speech, if (as I have argued) such an announcement to the recipient can go without saying?

This formula's apparent superfluity is precisely what makes it "marked" language in a literary setting. It is conspicuous by its presence—and thus bearing added, expressive, implied meaning.¹⁵⁷ As linguists would put it, the narration's report of this formula must be pragmatically motivated.¹⁵⁸ Ascertaining its precise import is beyond the scope of this article. It suffices to observe that the selective insertion of this formula bears the hallmarks of signaling for dramatic impact.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ See the useful programmatic discussion in Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 15–28.

¹⁵⁸ "Marked messages indicate marked situations" (Huang, "Anaphora," 298). Tellingly, the biblical narrator uses this same formula to give *scandalous* news directly to the text's audience: to report the slander of King David by Shimei son of Gera (2 Sam 16:7), and to report David's bizarre reaction to Absalom's death (ibid., 19:1). Such usage by the narrator is otherwise unattested, which supports my contention that **כֹּה אָמַר [פְּלִנִּי]** is employed expressively before recounting the content of a character's messages.

¹⁵⁹ My provisional analysis of the contexts of this formula's usage suggests that it is mentioned in order to highlight that the following message is *surprising to the audience* or that it *clashes with the recipient's will*. However, even if my speculation is incorrect, a pragmatic motivation of some sort remains the best explanation for the sparing usage of this identification clause.

My explanation is consistent with an analysis by H. Van Dyke Parunak ("Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotation Formulas," 505–7, 515). He finds that in the book of Jeremiah, the formula under discussion functions in part to "validate" the divine source of what follows, and sometimes to attest to "the symbolic import of the dispatch [itself]." Most importantly, Parunak observes that the formula stands (according to his syntactic analysis, in light of Masoretic accents) "in an adverbial relation" to the message that it marks, "rather than governing it as direct discourse." An "adverbial" relation is what would be expected if the formula is indeed a marked overencoding of attribution, as I have suggested.

Compare Meier's analysis of this formula (*Speaking of Speaking*, 273–98, 321). Unfortunately, he does not consider the baseline that the RR convention provides. Hence, after noticing that our formula's use is spotty, Meier is driven to three rather limited conclusions: "If the phrase *kōh 'āmar Yhwh* is supposed to provide the credentials for God's spokesperson, . . . other factors seem to be complicating the picture" (ibid., 277); the phrase in question is "an optional narrative feature that biblical storytelling found largely irrelevant for the purposes of its art" (ibid., 279); and "the formula is simply used to make citations of others' words" (ibid., 284). My research finds support for only the first of those conclusions. Meier only briefly considers the possibility of pragmatic motivation for our formula when he observes that "an apparent emphatic (because deictic) force . . . could account for its use in the prophets" (ibid., 289).

Excursus 8: Intrahuman Messaging as a Template for Depictions of Divine Messaging

Samuel Meier’s research found that the conventions for intrahuman agency transactions are consistent with the messaging among deities in mythological texts in Egypt, Ugarit, and Mesopotamia. He concluded that messenger deities “all behave in a fashion similar to their human counterparts who function as messengers on earth for all humans, from royalty to commoners.”¹⁶⁰ Hence our narrative convention would have applied even with regard to God’s agents.

One might object that the world of deities nonetheless was understood to differ from the world of human messaging, such that protocols for the latter did not apply. To that I would reply with the *principle of parsimony* as formulated (in a different context) by Michael Fishbane.¹⁶¹

Only a few of the human agency commonplaces were obviously inconsistent with the basic characteristics of deities. Messenger activity in the divine realm did lack some features found in the human realm—a distinction that derived from the presumption that deities are immortal and can travel freely. As Meier observes: “The provision of escorts for human messengers was a common courtesy, if not a necessity, for safe or trouble-free communication. Passports and the circumvention of bureaucratic hurdles were persistent features of human communication. Provision for lodging and meals along an extended route was a necessity. None of these aspects of human communication reappears in depictions of divine messenger activity.”¹⁶² Such distinctions, however, have no bearing on what is discussed in this article.

Straightforward Cases in the Angelic Dimension

To confirm that the RR convention applies to God’s agents, let us begin with four straightforward cases. In Gen 16:7–13 (Hagar at the Well), 21:17–18 (Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness of Beer-sheba), 22:11–14 (Abraham on Mount Moriah), and Jud 2:1–4 (Announcement at Bochim), a narrator relates that someone (or a group) is addressed by מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה *mal’ak Yhwh* (“Yahweh’s messenger”) or מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים *mal’ak ’ēlōhîm* (“God’s messenger”). But how do the recipients of the message themselves know this? We are never told that this crucial piece of information is disclosed to them. However, given that

¹⁶⁰ Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 53.

¹⁶¹ See above, note 17.

¹⁶² Meier, “Angel I,” 46–47.

the text's *audience* already knows the sender's identity, our convention must be in play: the characters' awareness goes without saying.¹⁶³

If we assume the existence of such a convention, we have a ready explanation for why the recipients respond in the ways that they do: Hagar quickly admits the self-incriminating fact that she is a runaway slave (Gen 16:8); she stops feeling helpless in the face of her son's distress and instead "opens her eyes" (21:19); Abraham expresses immediate willingness to obey (22:11); and the gathered Israelites promptly break into tears (Jud 2:4).¹⁶⁴

Three Obtuse Recipients of Divine Messages

The same convention must be at work even in the more challenging cases of Balaam, Gideon, and Manoah—as I will now demonstrate, in turn.

In Numbers 22, King Balak of Moab manages to engage the seer Balaam, whom Yahweh has cautioned (v. 20):

וְאֵת הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אֶדְבָּר אֵלֶיךָ אַתּוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה:
wə`ak `et-haddābār `āšer-`ādabbēr `elēkā `ōtō ta`āšeh.

. . . but—only the word that I speak to you, / that (alone) may you do. (Fox)

Then, as Balaam is traveling, he runs into difficulty. Via divine intervention (v. 31), he sees that a certain party—labeled a מַלְאֲכַי *mal`ak Yhwh* by the narrator—has been blocking his path. The narrator states:

וַיֵּרָא אֶת־מַלְאֲכַי יְיָ נֹצֵב בְּדַרְךָ
wayyar `et-mal`ak Yhwh niššāb badderek

. . . he saw the angel of the Lord standing in his way (ESV)

¹⁶³ One possibility is that divine messengers (angels) were supposed to be visibly recognizable as such. In 2 Sam 24:17, King David appears to recognize a מַלְאֲכַי *mal`ak Yhwh* on sight, for his first response is to pray to "Yhwh" while this angel was engaged in a task that did not involve messaging to David directly. The net effect is the same: the recipient knows the sender's identity even before the message has been delivered.

¹⁶⁴ That an agent "suddenly" starts speaking on the principal's behalf *in the first person* would have occasioned no surprise to the text's ancient audience. The apparent suddenness is an artifact of our unfamiliarity with ancient narrative convention, which relied upon the messaging script. The ancient audience would have assumed that the messenger has self-identified (as speaking on behalf of the sender) prior to the depiction of the message's content. When a text depicts the actual message content in the first person, this is licensed by *agency metonymy*; and the motive for such wording is immediacy (see my "Angels by Another Name").

In the context of our being told about Balaam’s sudden perception, and given the label for what he sees as “angel of the Lord,” his recognition of that angel’s identity (as such) is an implicature.¹⁶⁵ Sight and insight are so closely intertwined that the latter is conventionally assumed from the former (by conceptual metonymy) unless it is denied outright.¹⁶⁶

Moreover, the conditions of Balaam’s release from detention likewise imply that he is well aware that it was Yahweh who dispatched his interlocutor. For as the angel releases Balaam to continue on his way, this stricture is issued (v. 35):

וְאִפְסֵי אֶת־הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אֶדְבָּר אֵלֶיךָ אַתּוֹ תִּדְבֹּר
wə-’epes ’et-haddābār ’āšer-’ādabbēr ’ēlēkā ’ōtō tādabbēr.

but only the word that I speak to you, / that (alone) may you speak. (Fox)

This phrasing echoes Yahweh’s directive, quoted above.¹⁶⁷ As the addressee of both utterances, Balaam could hardly have escaped the conclusion that their first-person inflections refer to the same party.¹⁶⁸ At the same time, the angel’s mission would be fruitless if he allowed Balaam to proceed without first verifying that the seer knew the identity of that first-person “I.”

In short, the audience would conclude already at this point that Balaam must know the sender’s identity; such a construction enables the narrative to be informative and coherent. But *how* did Balaam learn of the principal’s identity? Once again, that crucial messaging step went without saying, according to convention.

In Judges 6:11–24, our assertion that Gideon knows the identity of his interlocutor from the start seems to be contradicted outright by the narrator’s report near the end of the episode (v. 22) that “Gideon saw that it was a ׀׀ מַלְאֲכָא׀׀.”¹⁶⁹ However, let us take into

¹⁶⁵ Baruch Levine (ad loc.) comments without elaboration: “When Balaam is enabled to see the armed angel, he immediately recognizes him as such.”

¹⁶⁶ See Grossberg, “Visual World.” Alternatively, recognition is part of the lexical meaning of the verb רָאָה *rā’ā* “to see,” as discussed in Excursus 9, toward the end.

¹⁶⁷ In addition to sharing six out of their eight words and having the same syntax, both utterances employ a memorable alliteration via an *aleph* (glottal stop) at the start of six words.

¹⁶⁸ As Jacob Milgrom comments: “The angel, here identified with the ‘I’ of the Lord, thus speaks or acts as the Lord’s surrogate.” On the conventional nature of depicting a message’s delivery as if the principal were speaking, as an expression of what I call *agency metonymy*, see my “Angels by Another Name.”

¹⁶⁹ On how the ancient audience would have reliably construed the angel in Judges 6:11–24 as speaking for Yahweh without that deity’s being present in the scene, see my “Angels by Another Name.” That discussion not only explains the agency metonymy that conditions the participant references, but also adduces similar interpretations by Abraham Ibn Ezra and Mordecai Breuer. Consequently, here I speak of Gideon’s interlocutor—in the singular.

account that Gideon exemplifies a calculating mentality—what Robert Polzin has called “the excessive concern men exhibit who seek by signs and tests to ensure the success of their ventures.”¹⁷⁰ Hence when a figure (labeled a מַלְאָךְ) appears and charges him with a mission on Yahweh’s behalf, it takes quite a while for this beleaguered farmer’s son to realize that perhaps he ought to submit in service to that deity. By all accounts, his tendency to keep putting God to the test persists even after he realizes that it is a messenger of Yahweh who seeks to extend the commission. Yet Gideon’s chronic faithlessness is projected into the boldest relief if the audience assumes that he knows from the start who the messenger’s sender is. Thus Gideon possesses the information—but he fails to grasp the profound, life-changing implications of receiving a divine commission.¹⁷¹ If so, then the audience would have construed the narrator’s report of Gideon’s sudden realization in verse 22 as his *doing a double take*: he has been forced to confront his situation (momentarily) from outside of his “business as usual” mindset.¹⁷²

In Judges 13:2–23, a messenger (labeled a מַלְאָךְ by the narrator) delivers a message to Manoah’s wife (vv. 3–5) and then to the householder Manoah himself (vv. 13–14). Although the two of them are confused as to whether this visitor is divine or human (vv. 6, 16), this should not obscure the fact that they clearly realize who dispatched their interlocutor. For her part, she describes the visitor fairly accurately to her husband as אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים *’iš ha-’ēlōhîm* (“God’s agent”)¹⁷³ and not as just some crazy stranger (v. 6); and at the story’s end she explicitly names *Yhwh* as the one who “showed us all these [things]” (v. 23). As for the householder, he right away proceeded to pray to *Yhwh*, whom he treated as the sender (v. 8). Yet how did this couple know to attribute the annunciation

¹⁷⁰ Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 168. And as Polzin also points out, Gideon’s habitual lack of faith promptly resumes in the next scene, vv. 36–40 (*ibid.*, 169–173).

¹⁷¹ The fact that characters like Gideon may resist or object to what a divine envoy tells them does not mean that they fail to realize that the envoy is divine and that the message’s source is God. Indeed, the Bible is filled with characters—including the entire nation of Israel, not to mention individuals called “righteous” such as Abraham and Moses—who hesitate to fully accept what they know that God is telling them (either directly or indirectly).

¹⁷² Compare the widow of Zarephath, who in 1 Kgs 17:24 exclaims to Elijah, “Now I know that you are an agent of God (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים *’iš ’ēlōhîm*)”—even though he had spoken to her explicitly in Yahweh’s name (v. 14), and she herself had previously called him by that title (v. 18). The widow’s “knowing” expresses a profound reevaluation of her interlocutor (Cogan, *Kings*, ad loc.; De Vries, *1 Kings*, ad loc.). My claim is that Gideon’s “seeing” expresses a similar idea.

¹⁷³ On this rendering of the construct expression אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים—which occurs 76 times in the Bible (usually in definite reference)—see above, note 72; below, Excursus 10, “On the Noun אִישׁ *’iš* as Denoting an Agent.”

and instructions to Yahweh? The answer is not given. Apparently our narrative convention obtains even here.

Excursus 9: Niphal ראה *r-’-h* as a Verb of Communication

What does the opening verb in Gen 18:1 mean? In its simplest form, the conventional view is that the Qal stem of the verb ראה *r-’-h* generally denotes a sense perception via the eyes, such that the Niphal stem denotes the reflexive of the causative, yielding “to present oneself” (i.e., “let oneself be seen,” as when going to a priest for inspection of a skin condition; Lev 13:19)¹⁷⁴—and thus, when applied to spiritual beings, “to reveal oneself.”¹⁷⁵

Other observers have noticed that the Niphal verb is seldom used in a manner that is connected with visual experience. Although visual elements (such as a “cloud” or “pillar” or “fire” or “glory”) are present in some cases, the focus is never on the visuals. Occasionally the verb conveys the more vague sense of “become perceptible.” More often, however, the focus is on *the authority of a message* that follows the verb’s use.¹⁷⁶ If the latter applies in our case, then our verb’s usual rendering as “appeared”—suggesting a *visually* perceptible manifestation—is misleadingly mechanical.

A comprehensive look at this verb’s usage is in order. Generally speaking, the meaning contribution of a Biblical Hebrew verb can be divined via the coordination of cognitive considerations (both semantic and pragmatic) and usage data. I will now look at

¹⁷⁴ Naudé, NIDOTTE, 3:1104.

¹⁷⁵ Culver, TWOT. In a more detailed analysis, Fuhs, TDOT 3:229, states that in theological usage, the Niphal denotes “the act of revelation itself, God’s self-manifestation in person and in action. In this usage *rā’ā* is not a specifically theological term but remains epistemological.” In what follows, I build upon Fuhs’ notion of “manifestation . . . in action” by attending to its cognitive context and to the generic epistemology.

¹⁷⁶ Fuhs (TDOT 13:236) and Vetter (TLOT 3:1182–83). Both authors explain the frequent lack of visual emphasis as a matter of semantic drift. They hold that the earliest theological usage of Niphal ראה, when applied to the deity, denoted “God’s appearance at a site that thus becomes holy.” Over time, this meaning became more abstract and increasingly vague. Fuhs writes that in many biblical depictions, the deity’s appearance “fades behind” a new focus on message delivery.

For his part, Vetter speaks of our verb in Gen 18:1 as being “stripped of its proper function.” Such wording displays an unwarranted attachment to our verb’s perceived “original” meaning. More neutrally, I explain the development of added, more abstract meanings as the result of normal, cognitively licensed meaning-extension processes over time; see below.

these factors, in turn, for **רָאָה** *rā'ā* in the Niphal stem.¹⁷⁷ I will limit the investigation to uses with a personal subject (as opposed to inanimate objects or ideas). I will marshal the cognitive frame (context) of “communication,” by which I mean an exchange of information via either words or gestures.¹⁷⁸ By the expression “our verb” I mean Niphal **רָאָה** when applied to persons; there are 63 such instances in the Bible.

The following analysis yields a picture of consistent usage throughout the Hebrew Bible. Such synchronic consistency is explained by natural *communicative needs*, not only on the part of the biblical characters who communicate with each other, but also on the part of the narrator who communicates with the audience. These needs are inherent in the process of communication.

In other words, a frame of communication provides a cognitive motivation that predicts certain patterns for when and how to employ our verb. I will present evidence to show that biblical usages correlate well with those predictions. (In contrast, our verb’s usages do not correlate with the subject’s literal visual appearance.) In addition, I will show that several sight-based Israelite conceptual metaphors readily support an abstract, communication-related meaning for our verb.

To anticipate the results, my main findings will be: Niphal **רָאָה** (when it takes a personal subject) almost always functions within a communication frame; and in most of those usages, it denotes the *advent* of communication.¹⁷⁹

A Cognitive Model: The Communication Handshake

For our purposes, the key fact about communication is as follows: Before two parties can communicate, two conditions must both be met: the first party must signal an intent to communicate; and the second party must decide that the other party indeed intends to communicate something. That is to say, both parties are necessarily involved from the beginning.

¹⁷⁷ When Waltke and O’Connor analyzed the Niphal stem, they discerned “the common notion(s) that the action or state expressed by the verb affects the subject ... or its interests” (IBHS § 23.1h, 380). The meaning that I will propose for our verb involves the subject’s interests. Specifically, it relies upon the stem’s “tolerative” meaning (allowing something effective to happen to oneself; Joüon/Muraoka § 51c, 139), which matches the customary understanding.

¹⁷⁸ In modern theories of communication, the definition is actually much more sophisticated than this. For our purposes, however, the classical, oversimplified “exchange” definition will suffice.

¹⁷⁹ Other verbs that are used (less frequently) to depict the deity’s initiation of communication include **קָרָא** *q-r-* “call” (Gen 22:11; 46:2), and **בָּוא** *b-w-* “come/enter” (Num 22:9, 20). (The latter thus qualifies as a metapragmatic speech verb *contra* Miller, *Representation of Speech*, 150; see below, note 182.)

Consequently, the advent of communication is not a trivial stage. This can be illustrated via a contemporary example: a fax (facsimile) transmission. In the fax domain, the advent stage is called the “handshake.” This stage comprises a series of well-known and audibly distinct steps. First, the sending device hails the receiving device by dialing the latter’s unique fax number. Upon getting the receiving device’s attention (as signaled by its picking up the call), the sending device beeps to identify itself as seeking to transmit a fax message. The receiving device answers with its own identifying signal as being able to receive faxes. Next the two devices exchange information about their specific capabilities, in order to agree on the best transmission format. Finally, a page header is created that reports the sending device’s identifying name and phone number. Only then does the receiving device begin to acquire the actual fax message’s content.¹⁸⁰

Communication between biblical characters requires the same initial back-and-forth process. It is perhaps most clearly spelled out in the story of the call of Moses in Exodus 3. Verses 2–6 depict a set of six distinct steps in the establishment of communication, prior to the actual message content (vv. 7 ff.). The table below shows how together those steps correspond closely to the handshake that precedes a fax transmission.

Verse	Depicted plot element	Fax handshake step
2	A burning bush	Initial call signal (ring tone)
3	Moses’s willingness to investigate	Answer initial call signal
4	The hailing of Moses by name	Send fax tone
4	Moses’s willingness to receive a message	Response to send fax tone
5	Instructions not to approach and to remove sandals	Negotiate the conditions of pending transmission
6	Identification of the principal	Sender’s identification for header

Depictions (or Not) of the Handshake within the Communication Process

The account of Moses at the burning bush pays exceptional attention to the advent of communication. In contrast, when the Bible normally depicts a communication event, the handshake stage goes without saying. Presumably an evoked communication script (similar to the messaging script discussed in the main article) is what cognitively licenses this elision. Then, precisely because the handshake stage is both required and usually routine, the audience will assume that it took place whenever the communication’s content is depicted.

¹⁸⁰ Fax Authority, “How a Fax Machine Works.”

The details of *how* the communication was established are rarely salient. However, under certain circumstances, a speaker will choose to make this stage explicit—and even devote much attention to it—in order to suit the goal of the speaker who is depicting the communication event. For example, all of the following oral statements could describe the same (hypothetical) contemporary communication event:

1. “I told her I need to reschedule our meeting.”
2. “I contacted her and said I need to reschedule our meeting.”
3. “First, I gotta borrow a phone because mine is dead. Then I have to call her three times because she doesn’t recognize the number and won’t answer. When she eventually does—and I let her know her it’s me—I go, ‘I need to reschedule our meeting!’”

Let us distinguish these three depictions. In #1, the default case, the speaker elides the establishment of communication altogether, in order to focus on the message’s content—which is the only salient information. In #2, before relating the content, the speaker finds it salient to mention that the communication resulted from some intentional effort on the speaker’s part. And in #3, the speaker spells out the advent stage, because it was unusually challenging.

The Pragmatics of Depicting the Advent of Communication

When depicting a communication event, the Hebrew Bible’s composers faced choices with regard to whether to mention the advent stage at all—and if so, to what extent. A cognitive- and usage-based pragmatic model of discourse (which presumes a known communication script) predicts that the composers’ decision would vary depending upon the point that they were trying to get across to their audience. The following predictions apply to biblical depictions of communication.

- In general, the advent stage should be elided. After all, it can be inferred from the very existence of a reported message, and it is usually easily accomplished.
- The advent stage warrants mention in order to indicate something unusual—such as the employment of considerable effort or exceptional means, or its highly significant implications for the future.

This predicted pattern indeed seems to match what we find as our verb’s usage, which is consistent with my thesis that it denotes the advent of communication. Let me begin with the depictions of communication that *human beings* initiate—whether directed to other people or to their deity. Our verb appears 16 times in such depictions, yet (as predicted) it is never used for mere speech interactions. Rather, it is used only when the handshake stage involves the *gesture of physical movement* toward the recipient. Such

instances include: Joseph’s chariot ride and his father’s wagon ride toward each other, as they reunite for the first time in decades (Gen 46:29); Israelites with certain skin conditions who must present themselves to a priest (Lev 13:7 [*bis*], 19); secret agents who enter hostile territory (2 Sam 17:17); and festival pilgrimages to the deity’s central sanctuary (e.g., Exod 23:17).¹⁸¹ Movement can be understood both as an unusual means to establish communication, and as a signal that is ambiguous enough to warrant clarification of intent.¹⁸²

As for the communication that *Yahweh* initiates, our verb’s usage ought to be the norm if we consider it unusual for the deity to establish communication with a human being at all. And indeed in the Hebrew Bible, *Yahweh* is rarely depicted as simply proceeding to speak to someone (especially after the Primeval History). Such familiar

¹⁸¹ What is the point of requiring a regular, pro forma rendezvous between representative Israelites and the deity at the sanctuary? I take it to be the *renewal of communication*, to preserve an ongoing sense of each household’s being in touch with the national deity. In this subset of usages, whenever our verb governs a grammatical subject, it is the Israelites—not the deity—who occupy the subject slot. Hence they are depicted as taking the initiative in the communication. It is up to them to maintain the relationship.

Similarly, in 1 Sam 1:22, Hannah uses our verb as she speaks of a future pilgrimage to introduce her infant son (Samuel) to *Yahweh*, to whom she has pledged her son in ongoing service. Her point seems to be that after she has formally presented her son at the sanctuary—and thus bootstrapped the relationship between him and her deity—his term of service must continue thereafter. Hence in that usage, our verb plausibly marks the advent of ongoing communication.

In his analysis of 1 Sam 1:22, Moshe Eilat (*Samuel and the Foundation of Kingship*, 19–20) has drawn attention to parallel wording that appears in Akkadian documents that likewise involve the act of dedication of children to the service of a deity. Given that situational context (namely, the ongoing nature of a service arrangement), scholars have rendered the Akkadian verb *id-da-gal* (Niphal equivalent) as “will belong.” However, in light of my analysis of that verb’s Hebrew cognate הָאָרַב and given both verbs’ application to the start of a new relationship arrangement, perhaps a meaning of “introduce, establish, initiate” warrants consideration, as well.

¹⁸² Our cognitive model of the communication process explains why its advent stage normally goes without saying in the biblical depiction of speech events. Misinterpretation of the conventional nature of that elision unfortunately seems to have misled Cynthia Miller during her classic study on how the Bible frames narrated speech and on verbs of speaking (*The Representation of Speech*, 147–195; 437–442). Miller refrained from classifying as a “matrix verb” any verb whose action indicates the advent of communication via gesture. (These Hebrew verbs can be glossed for convenience as “come,” “go over to,” “approach,” “stand,” “draw near,” “turn toward,” and “get up.”) Such a verb denotes actions that serve as familiar pragmatic, nonverbal cues during dialogue in daily life. Even so, Miller overlooked how essential such gestures are for interpreting a speech event, in those cases where the biblical narrator found the advent stage to be worth mentioning. See further above, note 179, and below, note 185.

treatment is generally reserved for ongoing communication with already-designated agents—Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Samuel, and various prophets and oracles.¹⁸³

Even so, our verb's use seems to correlate with communication events whose advent is unusual. Let me give two examples. First, our verb appears in connection with repeated divine interventions when the Israelites have disregarded Moses's ongoing leadership in the wilderness (e.g., Num 16:19–20). Even though Yahweh is normally depicted without fanfare as speaking with Moses and Aaron, in these cases Yahweh's communication is unusual in that it is actually addressed to a broader (and more cantankerous) audience.

Another example in which the advent of communication is noteworthy is the inauguration of the Tabernacle's ongoing ritual sacrifices (Leviticus 9). This is intended to be an ongoing channel of communication with the deity, to be conducted mainly via gesture rather than words. Under Moses' direction, the priests induce Yahweh to demonstrate that this new institution is indeed divinely approved. Our verb appears three times in this episode (vv. 4, 6, 23) to denote how Yahweh initiates that approval—not through words but (appropriately) via a fiery gesture (v. 24).¹⁸⁴ The deity establishes communication only in order to confirm that the ongoing communications channel is now open. Thereafter, the deity's acceptance of countless further sacrificial offerings goes without saying.

The Degree of Mention of the Advent of Communication

When Yahweh's establishment of communication is mentioned at all, it is often done only in passing, as part of the frame for the direct speech that follows. For example, in Gen 17:1, where Abram's deity opens a dialogue with him, it is our verb alone that corresponds to (and thus represents) the entire handshake process:

וַיֵּרָא יְיָ אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו . . .

wayyērā' Yhwh 'el-Abram, wayyō'mer 'ēlāyw . . .

Yahweh MADE CONTACT WITH Abram, and said to him . . .

¹⁸³ The exceptions include Abram in Gen 12:1, and Solomon in 1 Kgs 11:11. Ostensible exceptions include Jacob in Gen 31:3 (for the agency metonymy, cf. vv. 10–13); Manasseh in 2 Chr 33:10 (for the agency metonymy, cf. 2 Kgs 21:10).

¹⁸⁴ Similarly Milgrom, *Leviticus*, at 9:24: “Just as the initial appearance of the divine fire signified God's approval, so every sacrifice offered on the same altar will, with God's grace, also merit . . . acceptance.”

In 13 such cases, our verb immediately (or almost immediately) introduces a message that is depicted as direct speech.¹⁸⁵ In 6 additional cases, our verb starts a speech frame that introduces the spoken message while highlighting the conditions under which communication is established. For example (2 Chr 1:7):

. . . בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא נִרְאָה אֱלֹהִים לְשֹׁלֹמֹה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ . . .
ballaylâ hahû' nir'â 'ēlōhîm lišlōmoh, wayyō'mer lô . . .

That very night, Yahweh MADE CONTACT WITH Solomon, and said to him . . .

In contrast, in two narratives that involve our verb, the handshake is spelled out. In these cases, the advent stage appears to be of special interest—as predicted. The first such case is the story of the call of Moses in Exodus 3, detailed above. There, the handshake presumably matters because of the immense importance subsequently attached to Moses's authority. Hence the narrator treats us to a close-up view of how Moses gained that authority. Our verb begins that handshake passage (v. 2).

The other case in which the handshake is spelled out precedes the account of the prophet Elijah's dramatic showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18). In order to set up that showdown, Elijah first initiates contact with King Ahab on Yahweh's behalf. The narrator details this advent stage over the course of 16 verses, describing much business involving an intermediary, Obadiah. This elaboration enables the audience to learn just how risky Elijah's mission is, and how high the stakes are—thus putting the prophet's subsequent actions in proper perspective (and adding to the drama). Our verb appears 3 times within that handshake passage (vv. 1, 2, 15).

¹⁸⁵ For a list, see Table 2 (below). In these 13 cases, our verb is employed as the “matrix verb in a multi-verb quotative frame that introduces direct speech,” in the terminology of Cynthia Miller. It handily meets her definition for that classification. Semantically speaking, it denotes the speech act's *type* and its *participation structure*. Regarding type, this verb generically characterizes *incipient communication*, without further specification of its manner or content. Regarding participation structure (especially with the preposition לְ), the grammatical subject that it governs references the party who *initiates* the communication, intending to convey information to the grammatical object's referent. Syntactically speaking, our verb occupies the same position as Miller's metapragmatic speech verbs do; and when the direct-speech verb that follows is finite, both verbs are inflected identically (in number, gender, and tense/aspect). Thus on all counts, our verb qualifies as a metapragmatic speech verb—and thus as a verb of communication.

Miller herself did not classify our verb in this way. In Exod 3:16—the only instance she discussed—she classified it as describing an action that occurs merely “in conjunction with” the speech event. (More precisely, it is a prerequisite piece that occasionally is at issue.) See above, note 182; Miller, *Representation of Speech*, 442.

Usage Evidence Confirms the Communication Frame

The usage breakdown of our verb is as follows. Of the 63 relevant instances of our verb, 60 (95%) occur in communication situations, often involving messaging.¹⁸⁶ See Table 2 for a list of these instances by category.

{COMPOSITOR: PLACE TABLE 2 NEARBY.}

In the remaining 3 out of the 63 instances, their usages are too vague to classify.¹⁸⁷

The usage data strongly suggest that our verb belongs to the cognitive frame of communication. Typically it can be understood to express the *advent of contact* between its parties (while possibly entraining further steps; see below). Communication is typically initiated by the party who is designated by the verb's subject.¹⁸⁸

The Role of the Visual Element

Upon first hearing in Gen 18:1, the possibility that our verb might have been used literally, to mean a visual “appearance,” cannot be ruled out altogether. (Its literal meaning remains the norm when our verb's subject refers to an inanimate object.) However, as noted at the start of this excursus, scholars acknowledge that our verb is seldom used in a manner that is connected with visual experience. Indeed, if I subtract

¹⁸⁶ Theological dictionaries have not systematically considered the cognitive frame of communication in their analyses of our verb (Culver, TWOT; Fuhs, TDOT; Naudé, NIDOTTE; Vetter, TLOT). Regarding the nuances of the analysis of word usage in a defined corpus (such as the Bible), lexicologist Patrick Hanks cautions that “the difficulty lies in achieving just the right level of generalization.... There is no right level of generalization, although it is only too easy to make generalizations that are badly wrong” (Hanks, *Lexical Analysis*, 411). On the interplay between a word's specific senses and vagueness in usage, see Geeraerts, “Lexical Semantics”; Löbner, “Ambiguity”; Tuggy, “Ambiguity.”

¹⁸⁷ Exod 34:3; 2 Sam 22:11; Zech 9:14. When Yahweh instructs Moses to keep unauthorized personnel off of the mountain (Exod 34:3), our verb apparently denotes something that grazing animals cannot do (for otherwise our verb would have been applied to them as well, later in that sentence)—and certainly those animals can be visible. A meaning “become perceptible” would fit the context in 2 Sam 22:11 and Zech 9:14; the focus in these mythic/poetic passages is not on visual appearance per se.

¹⁸⁸ In my count of the instances with “personal subjects,” I have included those in which the grammatical subject is **יְהוָה** *kəvôd Yhwh* “Yahweh's glory” (Exod 16:10; Lev 9:6, 9:23; Num 14:10, 16:19, 17:7, 20:6). The divine **יְהוָה** *kāvôd* functions initially like a messenger, by appearing visibly on Yahweh's behalf so as to garner human attention and establish communication (similar to the messengers in Gen 18:1–2 and Jud 13:3). In those cases where an utterance follows, Yahweh is credited with the speech. However, to the extent that the messenger script has been evoked, such an attribution would be construed as agency metonymy: the messenger is speaking in the deity's name. On agency metonymy, see my “Angels by Another Name.”

instances where perception by one's eyes is *not* contextually salient, I find that a visual-perception frame correlates with only about 30% of our verb's usages.

More tellingly, the cognitive frame of communication fits our verb's usage data *better* than does the frame of visual perception. The former accounts best for the otherwise famously awkward references to pilgrims' "being seen by [the face of] God" in the sanctuary; and for the otherwise striking application to Joseph and Jacob's reunion (Gen 46:29; discussed below);¹⁸⁹ and for 11 cases in which our verb's use is wholly

¹⁸⁹ Given that the text offers no visual details, plain-sense commentators resort to somewhat forced readings when they explain this usage in visual terms. For example, Wenham writes of our verb (*ad loc.*): "its use here draws attention to the overwhelming impression on Jacob of the power, grandeur, and graciousness of Joseph in his own chariot attended by numerous servants." As Fuhs notes (TDOT 13:224), many exegetes despair and declare the text to be mispointed or corrupt. Fuhs himself declares this instance to be a "courtly idiom," although other such Niphal usage is conspicuously absent in royal settings—where our verb would be expected if it were regularly used in a visual-perception frame.

incompatible with the sense “to appear” (visually).¹⁹⁰ So whereas (as stated above) a communication frame accounts for 95% of the 63 instances of our verb, a visual frame can account for at most 86%. In short, the communication frame explains more of our verb’s usages—including the important ones.

Nonetheless, various visual elements are correlated with our verb’s usage, so I will now account for their function. Based on the cognitive model of communication, the answer is straightforward. When the advent stage involves a visual element (such as a “cloud” or “pillar” or “fire” or “glory”), it is the deity’s way of signaling the *intent* to establish communication. It functions like the initial call on the line in a fax handshake; or a hail on a hailing frequency for a two-way marine radio; or a ring tone in a phone call. It is used simply to get the intended recipient’s attention. At this stage in communication, the focus is on perception of the initial signaling device, not of the message or its sender.

¹⁹⁰ All of these cases occur within a communication frame in which the deity’s communication is not direct but rather mediated—which precludes the possibility of visual perception. Of the 11 instances, three refer to the same situation: Exod 3:16; 4:1, 5. In that passage, Yahweh claims that Moses can convince his audience that **נִרְאָה אֱלֹהִים** (“Yahweh contacted you”; 4:1) by turning his staff into a snake and back again. However, that particular wonder cannot prove that Moses actually *saw* the deity; thus neither Moses nor Yahweh expects that “appearance” is at issue.

Another three instances likewise refer to the same situation: Lev 9:4, 6, 23. The Tabernacle’s dedication rite features a sighting, but not of the deity—who is conspicuously not depicted as visible; rather, it is of flames “from before” Yahweh.

Another two instances involve the divine presence in the central sanctuary: Lev 16:2; Ps 102:17. The stricture against the high priest’s going past the sanctuary’s inner curtain precludes his seeing anything behind it.

In Jud 6:11–12, Gideon is approached by a figure who is presumably already visible, for we are told that he “came” and “sat under the terebinth” even before our verb is applied to him. The depicted action of sitting under a specific tree precludes construing v. 11 as a general heading for the events that follow. Thus if we read for coherence, our verb cannot designate “appearance.”

In 1 Sam 3:21, a summarizing statement equates our verb’s infinitive usage with the deity’s ongoing delivery of *verbal* messages via Samuel. For it concludes an episode (chapter 3) about young Samuel’s first encounter with his deity’s *voice*; vv. 1, 7, and 17 underscore what is at issue: the deity’s “word.” Visual content is conspicuously absent from both the narrator’s depiction and the characters’ interest. (The Hiphil participle in v. 15 is a substantive reflex of our Niphal verb; it does not independently establish visual content.)

Finally, 2 Chr 3:1 refers to an episode years earlier, when King David had been told where to build a temple to Yahweh; the allusion must be to what is depicted in 1 Chr 21:18. There, the prophet Gad is the intermediary between Yahweh’s messenger (angel) and David. Presumably, David receives the message from Gad without actually “seeing” either its sender (Yahweh) or the angel who first conveyed it—otherwise, why would Gad need to be the go-between? Consequently, our verb in 2 Chr 3:1 does not refer to a visual “appearance.”

By analogy, in the biblical setting, the visible signal is distinct from the deity. Thus in Exod 3:2, the burning bush functions as the hailing signal, as distinct from the angel and from the deity.¹⁹¹ (And in passages that depict the “cloud” or “pillar” as long-lasting, that entity functions like a beacon, for the communication is ongoing.)

Similarly, when a messenger is involved in the communication, that messenger serves as the attention-getting device. Messengers are as distinct from their principal as the burning bush and the pillar of cloud are distinct from the deity. Messengers are visible, while their principal is not.

The Communication Script and the Scope of Our Verb’s Semantics

Cognitive considerations predict that our verb can denote either the initial hailing call, or the advent (handshake) stage, or the whole communication event. These denotations are logically distinct, yet they are cognitively associated with each other via the communication script. That is, the initial step in a procedure (here, the hailing signal) can evoke the whole process. In this case, the “whole process” can be either the immediate handshake, or that stage plus the subsequent communication that the handshake exists to facilitate. The fact that the hailing signal is *attention-getting by design* makes it cognitively salient—and thus a perfect emblem for the process(es) that follow(s) it.

Because our verb grammatically attributes its action to the subject—which in agency cases refers to the sender/principal—we can assume that it originally indicated only the *initiation* of communication: the hailing signal. In such usages, our verb could be glossed fairly literally in English as “allow oneself to be perceived,” and more idiomatically as “make one’s presence felt,” while the frame clarifies that such action is being undertaken in the service of establishing communication. Procedurally speaking, what follows is an asymmetric back-and-forth between sender and receiver—a set of steps that our Niphal stem would less readily convey. Nonetheless, by recourse to the communication script, our verb came to denote that advent stage; in such usages, it could be glossed as “make

¹⁹¹ In verses that mention a “cloud” or “pillar,” the prefixed preposition *bə-* that governs its mention is ambiguous. In the terminology used by grammarians, I construe it as marking *the manner in which* our verb’s denoted action takes place (as in Exod 3:2; 6:3; Ezek 19:11; Ps 102:17), rather than marking its *spatial location* (as in Gen 9:14; 18:1; Exod 13:7; 34:3; Deut 16:4). My construal is supported by Deut 31:15: a second, spatial-location usage of this preposition appears in that verse only after the first usage that marks the manner of action.

contact with.” And eventually, by further extension, it was employed to stand for the whole communication event.¹⁹²

The usage data supports that theory. An initial classification of the 60 instances in the communication frame confirms that *all three denotative scopes occur* in the Hebrew Bible corpus. Yet their distribution is markedly skewed: Only five instances (about 8%) appear to employ our verb to denote the *hailing signal*: Exod 3:2; 17:7; 1 Sam 1:22; 2 Sam 17:17; and Mal 3:1–2. More than two-thirds of our verb’s usages denote the *advent stage*, as in our examples Gen 17:1 and Exod 3:2; and also in Gen 18:1, as argued in the body of this article. The remaining usages appear to denote the *entire communication event*, including Gen 12:7 (2nd instance); 22:14; 35:1; Exod 3:16; 4:1, 5; 1 Sam 3:21; and 2 Chr 3:1.

Denotation of the advent stage is so frequent that it must be considered not only a lexical meaning of our verb, but also its *conventional* one. That is, this verb by default conveys that *communication is established* between the parties in question.¹⁹³

When an Agent Functions as Intermediary

Our verb applies to the initiator of a communication event regardless of whether that party ever “appears” in person to the message’s receiver. For the communication might well take place *via an intermediary*. Three lines of evidence converge to support this conclusion. (Taken together, their impact is robust, even though scholars have raised doubts about particular pieces.)¹⁹⁴

First, 1 Sam 3:21 (*wayyōsef Yhwh lāhērā’ōh*) plainly equates our verb’s usage with the deity’s ongoing delivery of messages via an agent, Samuel (a “prophet,” v. 20):¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Extension of a word’s meaning by recourse to a cognitive script (metonymy) is alternatively viewed by some linguists as a presupposition in that word’s use, or as a discourse implicature. Pragmatic strengthening is said to be a factor in the development of new word meanings, and the boundary between implicature and lexical meaning is not a firm one.

¹⁹³ As for denoting the *whole communication event*, given the modest yet significant attested frequency of this usage, the ancient Israelites conceivably processed such usages via their mental lexicon—as a distinct lexical sense—rather than arrive at the same meaning via metonymy.

¹⁹⁴ Happily, neither textual criticism nor source criticism presents difficulties in the cited cases.

¹⁹⁵ After having been told about Samuel’s encounter with his deity’s voice (in the same chapter), the text’s audience would reliably expect that what now “continues” are further *mediated verbal communications*. Thus although the explicit mention of verbal mediation in the second, parallel clause might be discounted on textual grounds (namely, the final prepositional phrase lacks a direct equivalent in the Septuagint and in an Old Latin codex), our verb’s application to a principal–agent relationship is secure.

וַיִּסַּף יְיָ לְהִרְאֶה בְּשִׁלֹּה יַהְוֶה continued to make contact in Shiloh;
 כִּי־נִגְלָה יְיָ אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל בְּשִׁלֹּה indeed, Yahweh made disclosures¹⁹⁶ to Samuel in Shiloh,
 בְּדִבְרֵי יְיָ through Yahweh’s word.

Second, our verb is used when adult males are standing in for the whole populace. (That is, the men function as agents on behalf of that populace.) In two parallel usage pairs, our verb is applied to כָּל־זָכוּרֶיךָ *kol-zakûrakā* (lit. the nation’s males; Exod 34:23; Deut 16:16) and then to the populace (the referent of the 2nd-person possessive pronouns in Exod 34:23–24, and of the first instance of כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל *kol-yisrā’el* in Deut 31:11).¹⁹⁷ This dissonance in participant references signals that the first party represents the second party for the duty of visiting the sanctuary during festivals. In each pair, the latter usage is a metonym that regards the males as representative. Our verb applies literally to the (male) delegates, while a WHOLE-FOR-PART metonymy credits their principal (“Israel”) with the stated action. Our verb’s semantics evidently license that metonym.

A third line of evidence is a set of situations where an angel stands in for the deity; the agency is clear because reference to the principal’s action is preceded by the agent’s specific designation. Three encounters with a מַלְאֲכֵי יְיָ *mal’ak Yhwh* (Gen 22:11; Exod 3:2; 1 Chr 21:18) are depicted later—but still in their respective source texts—as a deed of Yahweh’s, using our verb (Gen 22:14; Exod 3:16; 2 Chr 3:1).¹⁹⁸ This dissonance in the participant references signals an *agency metonymy* that refers to a messenger in terms of the principal.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Or: “disclosed himself.” The rendering is necessarily approximate because—in the terminology of the Israeli linguist Menachem Dagut—a syntactical void exists here between Hebrew and English (*Hebrew-English Translation*, 84–90).

¹⁹⁷ In these passages, some scholars conjecturally emend the Masoretic pointing of our verb (changing the stem to Qal), because the conventional construal makes so little sense. This excursus provides a solution to that crux.

In Deut 16, although other persons come to the sanctuary (vv. 11, 14–15), the wording in verse 16 is so distinctive that surely its denoted activity applies to the men exclusively. In 31:11, the same wording applies to כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל (“all Israel”), so likewise that term must refer to the men.

¹⁹⁸ Perhaps another instance in which our verb’s subject refers explicitly to Yahweh but implicitly to an angel is Num 14:14, in light of Exod 14:19. However, source critics could discount the canonical reading by arguing that the two passages do not derive from the same source.

¹⁹⁹ Such usage underscores that the principal (here, *Yhwh*) is the source of authority for the agent’s action or message. On the cognitively licensed narrative convention of *agency metonymy* (a term that I coined), see my “Angels by Another Name.”

In sum, our verb is conventionally applied to a principal whose agent is functioning as the intermediary. Thus when the ancient audience encountered a clause that is governed by our verb, it was evidently reasonable for them to imagine the involvement of an agent. This finding undercuts the conventional scholarly construal of our verb in Gen 18:1, namely that it means “appeared” (visibly), as ostensibly confirmed by the immediate manifestation of three very visible figures in verse 2. Rather, such a view was not the only option.

Recognition of the Sender’s Agent (and of the Sender)

When our verb is used in depicting a messaging situation, does our verb’s semantic potential include the recipient’s recognition of the identity of the sender’s agent as such (and thus of the sender)? Let us first consider a simpler, face-to-face situation. When Jacob and Joseph reunite (Gen 46:29–30), the aged father pointedly recognizes his son:

וַיֹּאסֶר יוֹסֵף מְרֻכָּבָתוֹ	Then Joseph prepared his chariot
וַיַּעַל לְקִרְיַת־יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גֹּשֶׁן	and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen.
וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו . . .	He <u>presented himself</u> to him. ²⁰⁰ . . .
וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יוֹסֵף	Israel said to Joseph,
אֲמוּתָה הַפַּעַם	“Now let me die,
אֲחֵרֵי רְאוֹתִי אֶת־פְּנֶיךָ	since I have seen your face
כִּי עוֹדָךְ חַי:	and know that you are still alive.” (ESV)

The classical English rendering of our verb here, “presented himself,” reflects only the initial hailing signal in the advent process. But what about Israel’s actual recognition of his son? His realization hardly goes without saying; it is far from obvious how Jacob manages to recognize his long-lost son after last having seen him at age 17—especially given that in the meantime, Joseph had not been recognized by any of his brothers on several occasions. Does the text’s audience learn about it only after the fact (from v. 30), and then read it back into the previous verse? That would require an increased processing effort. So a possibility worth considering is that *our verb indicates semantically* that one

²⁰⁰ This clause does not specify the respective semantic roles—that is, which participant is the “agent” and which is the “patient.” Exegetes dating back to Rashi (11th c.) usually construe that Joseph is the former while Jacob is the latter. However, the opposite view has also been advanced (Polak, “Language Variation,” 315n9; Baker, *Genesis Handbook*, ad loc.). Perhaps this Niphal usage is in effect reciprocal: the two parties reestablished direct communication with each other. (After all, each party had long entertained the belief that the other one was dead.) In any case, for the present purpose, this question does not need to be decided.

party recognizes the other (while that recognition may also be evident from the parties' subsequent words and actions).

Under what conditions would recognition be part of our verb's meaning? Not when it denotes only the *hailing call* that initiates the communication event. But let us recall that in the *advent stage* of communication, the recipient's recognition of the sender's identity is an essential and final step. Now, I have shown that our verb denotes that advent stage by default. Given that fact, then our verb's use *implicitly conveys the receiving party's recognition* of the sender's identity. This lexical presupposition would therefore be what the parser—in attempting to process the text's signal—would attempt to apply first.

Cognitive Semantics and Communication

A telling manifestation of the communication-related semantic potential of our verb is biblical characters' widespread use of the Qal imperative to *call their addressee's attention* to a noteworthy impending utterance, as in Gen 27:27:²⁰¹

וַיֹּאמֶר רְאֵה רִיחַ בְּנֵי כְרִיחַ שְׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בָּרַכּוּ יְיָ:

wayyo 'mer ra'eh rêah bənî kə-rêah sâdeh 'ăšer bĕrākô Yhwh.

He said, “See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that Yahweh has blessed....”

In other words, the Qal verb was regularly employed like a hailing call.²⁰²

Recent conceptual studies provide ample grounds to support the notion that our verb has an abstract, communication-related meaning. Yael Avrahami²⁰³ has discussed the Bible's frequent use of the root רִאָה—and other terms from the semantic field of sight—to denote *cognition* in particular,²⁰⁴ and *experience* in general. She also points to usages that presuppose the converse, namely that “what is unseen is also unknown.”²⁰⁵ She explains the semantic correlations between sight and thought as presupposing that “sight

²⁰¹ Also, e.g., Gen 39:14; 41:41; Exod 7:1; 31:1; 33:12; 35:30; Deut 2:31; Josh 6:2; 8:4; 2 Sam 7:2; 15:3; Ezek 4:15; Zech 6:8.

²⁰² In the classical study of rhetoric, the attention-getting use of an introductory word or phrase is a device known as *asterismos*. It is distinguished by its communicative function rather than its semantic meaning. A “seeing” imperative can be used for this purpose in most languages (San Roque et al, “Universal Meaning Extensions of Perception Verbs,” 384).

²⁰³ *The Senses of Scripture*, 136, 237–51, 266–69. Her analysis hardly touches upon Niphal usages, thus providing useful background for the present study.

²⁰⁴ So also Michael Carasik: “Sight is the sense used in biblical Hebrew as a metaphor for thinking” (*Theologies of the Mind*, 52); Tilford, *Sensing World*, 60.

²⁰⁵ Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture*, 249.

is first-hand learning, and is based on personal experience.”²⁰⁶ Furthermore, she notes the use of sight metaphors to depict one’s *involvement in* an event, or being *present at* an event.²⁰⁷

Avrahami marshals these tropes to explain (among other things) why the experience of alternate or spiritual reality, including prophetic experience, is depicted in terms of the experience of sight. More generally, in my view, these conceptually fundamental metaphoric usages of *ראה* explain why it would have been natural terminology for depicting various aspects of communication between *any* two parties. Regardless of our Niphil verb’s denotative scope—whether it is denoting the hailing call, or the handshake, or the communication event as a whole—Avrahami’s findings suggest that such usages were consistent with numerous other conventional yet *nonvisual* applications.

Nicole Tilford likewise perceives a conceptual milieu in ancient Israel that would have supported our verb’s usage as I have characterized it. She explains that most ways to depict cognition are extensions of human sensory perception; as she says, “we describe how we think by the things we do.”²⁰⁸ Although the conceptual metaphor COGNITION IS SEEING is nearly universal among known languages, in biblical literature it has a particular flavor that presumably reflects how its ancient audience conceived of their world. The Bible invokes sight in a manner that conceives of it as a voluntary action. It also presupposes that one who sees can instantly detect an object’s presence and can readily identify it after formulating a hypothesis about its nature and character; and that the act of seeing induces a change in the perceiver. Finally, the Bible regularly expresses the mental tasks of considering, understanding, and concluding in terms of seeing.²⁰⁹

Given Tilford’s findings, the sense of sight as conceived in ancient Israel would have been an ideal vehicle for depicting either a hailing signal, or the advent of communication, or an entire communication event. After all, these too are voluntary, involve detection of a signal and identification of its source, and usually induce a change within the participants.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 248.

²⁰⁸ Tilford, *Sensing World*, 35.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 37, 39–42, 51–67, 210. Tilford’s analysis thus goes well beyond the simple observation that many biblical passages presuppose that *seeing entails understanding* (e.g., Gen 32:2; Exod 2:5–6; 1 Sam 1:11; 1 Kgs 18:17; Isa 6:10), although this fact seems noteworthy, as well.

The Advent Stage and Subsequent Messaging Protocols

As I explain in the body of this article, in Gen 18:1–15, the advent stage of communication is dispensed with quickly—before the end of verse 2. Yet here I must note that the message delivery is not depicted until verse 10. What the intervening verses describe are the usual messenger protocols that *follow* a messenger’s arrival but *precede* message delivery: bowing and a show of deference, according to the relative status of principal and recipient; granting the messenger a prompt audience; offering rest to the presumably weary messenger; and providing a meal in the recipient’s presence.²¹⁰ Because human travelers differ from fax machines, the ancient Near Eastern messaging script elaborates upon the handshake model described above—providing additional typical steps before a message is conveyed. Normally such messaging protocols go without saying in biblical depictions. The reasons for their inclusion in Genesis 18 are worthy of study; however, that topic is beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusions

- When Niphal ראה takes a personal subject, it almost always functions within a communication frame. It signals that the person (or personified divine being) designated as the subject is initiating a communication event. This is how it “involves the subject’s interests” (as Niphal verbs are said to do). The communication’s intended receiver (the semantic patient) is designated by the object of an attendant prepositional phrase.
- Conventionally, by default, our verb’s usage indicates the *advent of communication*; this includes the recipient’s *recognition* of the sender’s identity. (That is, the semantic patient is aware of the communication attempt and *realizes* who the semantic agent is. Thus both parties are involved in the establishment of communication.)
- In a much smaller number of related usages, our noun denotes the *hailing signal* that initiates a communication event. Meanwhile, in other usages, it appears to denote the *entire communication event*. All three denotations are cognitively related via a pre-existing communication script.
- Although the advent of communication often coincides with the appearance of a visible entity or a messenger, in those cases the latter is functioning as the hailing signal. As such, it is logically distinct from both the message and its sender.

²¹⁰ Meier, *Messenger*, 137–161.

- Pragmatically speaking, our verb is employed in order to indicate something unusual about the communication event in question, or about its inauguration.
- Our verb’s semantics are ideal for expressing that a communication channel has been established.

Excursus 10: On the Noun **אִישׁ** *’iš* as Denoting an Agent

The noun **אִישׁ** *’iš* (or its functional plural, **אֲנָשִׁים** *’anāšîm*) often regards its referent in terms of a *relationship* to something else—typically another party, or the group of which that referent is a member.²¹¹ That is, in certain contexts, its meaning is roughly equivalent to the English noun “participant.”²¹²

I explain the agency use of **אִישׁ** as a differentiated (special case) sense of its “participant” usages. It regards its referent as a “participant’s participant”—that is, as standing in place of one of the other participants. As such, it is twice removed from a presumed “original” (more concrete) meaning as “man.”²¹³ If so, it would be a good candidate for a distinct lexical sense.²¹⁴

This noun is often applied within an agency frame (situation) to agents of the deity. A prominent example is: “Now the **אִישׁ** Moses was very humble” (Num 12:3). The narrative context is that Miriam and Aaron are challenging Moses’ authority as *God’s representative*; that is the most salient fact about him in that situation. Arguably, **אִישׁ** is being used as a title that refers precisely to Moses’ office as Yahweh’s agent. That title was also used for Moses in his capacity as God’s agent in Exod 11:3. The label **אִישׁ** is likewise a designation for Joseph as God’s agent (Ps 105:17), as well as for the divine agents who are encountered in the visions of Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel (Ezek 9:2–3; 10:2, 6–7; 40:3–6; Zech 1:8–10; 2:5–6; Dan 9:21; 10:5–6, 18–20; 12:6–7).

²¹¹ For discussion, see my “The Noun **אִישׁ**.”

²¹² A universally accepted relational sense of **אִישׁ** is as “husband.” That role can be seen as a “participant” in a (presumably contractual) domestic partnership.

²¹³ I discuss this further in “Agency.” I am not the first to advance this idea. In the 14th-century-BCE Amarna letters, the Akkadian term *amilu* (cognate to Hebrew **אִישׁ**) was employed as a designation in agency contexts; on that basis, Alan Crown speculated in 1974 that “it is most likely that the Biblical Hebrew word **אִישׁ** is . . . used on occasion with the sense of . . . agent for another” (“Alternative Meaning”). For a similar speculation, see Jirku, “Der ‘Mann von Tob.’”

²¹⁴ The cognitive linguist Sebastian Löbner has observed that “the meaning variation encountered as polysemy often involves more than one meaning shift” (“Ambiguity,” 59).

To the extent that the word שׂיָא seems to designate an agent, the audience is supposed to ask itself: *How is this referent being viewed as participating in the scene? In relation to which group or other party?*²¹⁵

Why Employ Such a Vague Term?

Scholars have countered that if “agent” were indeed meant by שׂיָא, the narrator could easily have used a more explicit agency term, such as מְלֹאֲךָ מַלְאֲכָא *mal’ak Yhwh*, as in other episodes—or even מְלֹאֲךָ מַלְאֲכָא *mal’āk* alone. As shown in the main portion of this article, such an objection is met by my finding that שׂיָא is Hebrew’s *generic* term for an agent.²¹⁶ As such, it is the most linguistically efficient way to establish the key fact of representation (agency itself).

In order to establish conclusively that my hypothesis is correct, I will need to show that שׂיָא meets the following criteria:

- Found across a wide range of agency situations.²¹⁷
- Used consistently where the bare fact of representation is most salient, and where other alternatives would produce an overspecified (marked) expression.²¹⁸
- Conversely, not used in agency situations in which more specific labels are more informative—whether the latter be unmarked or marked.²¹⁹

Based upon my first few passes through the data, these criteria strike me as achievable, but my monograph is not yet complete.

Semantic or Pragmatic?

Some scholars offer another objection, that agency is not part of this noun’s semantics per se; rather, agency concerns are imposed by the communicative situation, as a matter of

²¹⁵ Expressed in terms of Cognitive Grammar (a branch of cognitive linguistics), that group or other party in question is the *base* against which this noun *profiles* its referent. See Ellen van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 117–18.

²¹⁶ See above in the section “The Designation אֲנָשִׁים *’anāšîm* in Light of Cognitive Linguistics.” On generic-specific relations (also known as *hyponomy*) and on taxonomy as a subset of such relations, see Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 88–92, 109, 136–152.

²¹⁷ Hall and Waxman, “Assumptions about Word Meaning.”

²¹⁸ Cruse, “Semantics of Lexical Specificity”; Downing, “On ‘Basic Levels’ and the Categorization of Objects.” For an example of applying this diagnostic, see above, note 87.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* For an example of applying this diagnostic, see above, note 85.

“pragmatic import” or “discourse implicature.”²²⁰ Although semantic and pragmatic considerations actually exist on a continuum,²²¹ it is worth asking whether we can agree on what criteria would distinguish clearly what is a semantic contribution.

The mental lexicon stores conventionalized, repeated usages of words in a special and relatively available format. We know this because psycholinguistic studies show that those senses are *processed more quickly* (at an earlier stage of linguistic processing) than novel usages of those same terms. The mind learns from experience to construct a shortcut that avoids the need to make a fresh pragmatic analysis in each instance. (This distinction applies not only to individual words, but also to conventionalized metonymies, metaphors, phrases, idioms, and constructions.)

It is well recognized that the pragmatic force of a word (that is, its edgier, context-dependent connotations) can, over time, become a distinct lexical sense. That is, the “pragmatic import” or “discourse implicature” becomes entrenched in the mind and processed as a semantic feature.

Lexicographers are of course practiced at recognizing distinct senses of a polysemous word (despite admitting that words do not actually possess fixed senses in actual use). They look for clusters of similar usages that can be explained as cognitively motivated by a recognized process of meaning extension, such as metonymy.

In the case of **פֶּסַח**, I have provided a cognitive motivation (namely, intensification) for its agency sense. The challenge remains to identify the hallmarks of an entrenched lexical sense, even while some related usages may be more contextually (pragmatically) conditioned.

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²²⁰ The first phrase is from an anonymous reader of an earlier version of this article; the second phrase, from Robert Holmstedt (personal communication, 4 March 2014). Actually, however, such a challenge applies to ascertaining the meaning of *any* word.

²²¹ Linguists can find no clear distinction between semantic and pragmatic contributions to meaning. Indeed, semantically oriented linguists and pragmatically oriented linguists each have their own way of explaining how audiences interpret certain linguistic acts—the same outcome being reached via different paths.

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Table 1. Schematic Summary of the Parser’s Processing, as the Story Unfolds

Verse	Depiction	Known related information	Provisional interpretation	Expectation	Generated question
1a	Yahweh seeks to communicate with Abraham , possibly involving a personal appearance.	Communication is established only when Abraham realizes it. This deity sometimes dispatches messengers and appoints agents.	Yahweh might have dispatched one or more messengers to Abraham; or Yahweh might be making a personal appearance.	Yahweh is providing a specific signal of intent to communicate. Abraham will realize that Yahweh intends to communicate.	<i>When will Abraham notice what’s going on? In which manner will this event occur—by message or directly?</i>
1b	A certain setting of place and time, with the focus on Abraham	Often the message’s content is stated immediately after a clause like the previous one—unlike what we are told here.	This must be the setting in which Yahweh establishes communication with Abraham, or makes a personal appearance.	Communication will be established very soon—and in this setting.	<i>How, exactly, will Abraham experience the advent of communication?</i>
2a	Three אנשים appear before Abraham.	These figures’ designation can be construed as “agents”—a label that would be natural to use in a messaging situation.	This communication attempt must be via messaging; these are the “agents” who are representing Yahweh’s interests.	Abraham will construe these “agents” as the awaited signal that Yahweh is initiating communication.	<i>Does Abraham recognize that these figures are Yahweh’s agents?</i>
—	(No explicit statement of Abraham’s lack of recognition, to cancel the expectation)	The verb in question conventionally denotes that communication has been established, which requires that the recipient be aware of the sender’s identity.	Abraham recognizes his visitors as agents of Yahweh. Communication has been established.	Abraham will respond to these agents according to standard protocol for messengers. They will disclose a message.	<i>How does Abraham now respond to the advent of communication? What is the message’s content?</i>

Table 2. Niphal **רָאָה** *r-ʿ-h* as Denoting the Advent of Communication

I. Communication Initiated by Human Beings (not as the deity's agents)

Advent via a gesture of movement toward other human beings

Gen 46:29; Lev 13:7 (*bis*), 19; 2 Sam 17:17

Advent via a gesture of movement toward the deity

Exod 23:17; 34:20, 23, 24; Deut 16:16 (*bis*); 31:11; 1 Sam 1:22; Isa 1:12; Ps 42:3; 84:8

II. Communication Initiated by the Deity (often involving human or divine agents)

Introduces the spoken message promptly (“metapragmatic speech verb”)

Gen 12:7 (1st instance); 17:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9–10; 48:3–4; Exod 3:16; Num 16:19–20; 20:6–7; Jud 6:12; 13:3; 1 Kgs 9:2–3 (1st instance); 2 Chr 7:12

Introduces the spoken message while noting the advent conditions

Exod 16:10–11; Num 14:10–11; 17:7–9; Deut 31:15–16; 1 Kgs 3:5; 2 Chr 1:7

Alludes to a prior speech event in terms of what was communicated therein

Gen 12:7 (2nd instance); 35:1; Exod 4:1, 5; 6:3; Jud 13:10, 21; 1 Sam 3:21; 1 Kgs 9:2–3 (2nd instance); 11:9; 2 Chr 3:1 (alluding to 1 Chr 21:18)

With a narrative focus on how the communication is established

Exod 3:2; 1 Kgs 18:1, 2, 15

With a narrative focus on the messenger protocols after the advent of communication

Gen 18:1

Advent of communication from a particular place (above the ark cover)

Lev 16:2*

Advent accomplished via a gesture (rather than speech)

Lev 9:4, 6, 23; Mal 3:1–2†

Advent of ongoing regular communication

Gen 22:14; Num 14:14;‡ Jer 31:2–3 (with LXX); Isa 60:1–2; Ps 102:17

* Reading in light of co-references that describe communication (Exod 25:22; 30: 6, 36; Num 7:89; 17:19).

† Although the deity's messenger is being dispatched on an errand (rather than to deliver a message), his advent is itself a communication signal.

‡ Construing the “eyes” in the expression **עֵינַי בְּעֵינַי** *‘ayin bə-‘ayin* as referring (via a PART-FOR-WHOLE metonym) to the Israelite witnesses' first-hand knowledge, as a group, of the “cloud” and “pillar.” Cf. Isa 52:8; Jer 34:3; Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 249.