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Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical Interpretation: Resolving Cruxes in Gen 18:1–15 and 32:23–33

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Abstract: Both the accounts of Abraham's three visitors (Gen 18:1–15) and of Jacob's nighttime intruder (32:23–33) are famous interpretive cruxes. This article shows why the plain sense is that both Abraham and Jacob recognize right away that the newly introduced figures represent their deity. It does this by: (1) accounting for the place of messengers in the mental life of ancient Israel; (2) recovering an under-appreciated yet cognitively based narrative convention regarding messengers; (3) setting the starting point of each narrative with care; (4) attending to the semantics and pragmatics of the main noun in both accounts; and (5) emulating the online processing of language that an audience's mind automatically employs, which is incremental and prediction-driven. In the emulation exercise, the audience's mental parser arrives at a "recipient recognition" (RR) construal quickly—already before the end of 18:2, and by the end of 32:25. Furthermore, handling 32:25 in this manner resolves a third crux at the same time (32:2–3). An RR construal is cognitively favored because it yields a coherent and informative text, unlike the "obscured origin" (OO) construal that theologians presently favor. Meanwhile, the emulation validates a previously proposed hypothesis that the noun אִישׁ ʾīš functions as the generic label for designating an "agent"—that is, someone who is representing the interests of another party. All told, this article employs a variety of cognitive factors as keys to plain-sense interpretation. Finally, it touches upon the theological implications of the RR construal of the two passages under study.

Keywords: Agency; Angels; Cognitive scripts; Communication; Lexical semantics; Online language processing; Messaging; Messengers; Narrative conventions; Participant reference tracking; Pragmatics; 'ish (the Hebrew word)

> 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[1]

One of the Bible's best-known encounters between agents of Yahweh[2] and an individual person is recounted in Gen 18:1–15.[3] Three visitors who present themselves to Abraham soon proclaim a message of divine

1 MacDonald, "Discourse Analysis and Biblical Interpretation," 165. Please note that the present article will often cite a companion piece, "Angels by Another Name," which (like this one) examines a narrative convention and its exegetical consequences.

2 To represent the tetragrammaton as the name of Israel's God, this article employs the equivalents "Yahweh" in English, יְהוָה 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 I owe a debt to Samuel A. Meier for our stimulating initial conversations on this article's topic. Also I am grateful to Vivie Mayer-Deutsch, Daniel Rodriguez, Steven E. Runge, Daniel Shevitz, Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Ellen J. van Wolde, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful remarks on earlier versions. The usual disclaimer goes without saying, since only my name is listed as the author.

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blessing upon him and his wife Sarah: she will bear a son.[4]

A similar and likewise well-known case occurs two generations later, as recounted in 32:23–33.[5] 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 being(s); their recognition of Yahweh's involvement is delayed.[6] 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.[7]

The present study defends the latter view. It employs cognitive considerations to show that the text's *plain sense*[8] is that Abraham and Jacob know at once that they are dealing with their deity's messengers.[9] Accomplishing this task involves the following steps:

- account for the place of messengers in the mental life of ancient Israel;
- recover a narrative convention that is germane yet lately has been overlooked;
- set the starting point of each narrative with care;
- incorporate a recently proposed hypothesis on the semantics and pragmatics of the main noun in both accounts; and
- construe the initial portion of each narrative by emulating the way that the human mind normally processes language.

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

1 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.

4 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).

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

6 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 (*Commentary*, at 18:1–15), Sailhamer (*Pentateuch as Narrative*, at vv. 1b–8), and Lyons (*Canon and Exegesis*, 159–161, 265).

7 *Regarding Abraham*: Rashbam (12th c.) at Gen 18:2; Ḥizz'kuni (13th c.) at v. 2; Naḥmanides (13th c.) at v. 3; Baḥya ben Asher (13th c.) at v. 2; Benno Jacob (1934) at vv. 1–2. *Regarding Jacob*: David Kimḥi (12th c.), as implied at 32:25, 26, 27 (see below). 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 (Philo, *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.

8 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, "Peshat, Derash, and the Question of Context."

9 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.

- 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.[10] 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.[11]
- 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 English.[12] This article's topic does not actually require us to distinguish the above types.[13]
- In English, the term "messenger" applies not only to someone who delivers a message, but also to an agent who does errands.[14]
- The Hebrew term מַלְאָךְ *malʾāk* (usually glossed as "messenger") has a similarly broad scope of application.[15] Biblical characters who are designated by this term variously delivered messages; negotiated agreements; investigated situations; delivered, fetched, or procured goods; summoned persons; and more.[16]
- The term "messenger" can be applied to biblical characters who are not labeled מַלְאָךְ *malʾāk* yet share the same function. The Bible repeatedly uses the term מַלְאָךְ in co-reference with other role terms.[17] 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

10 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").

11 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 Stein, "Angels by Another Name," which focuses on the narrative convention that I call "agency metonymy."

12 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.

13 Hence this article does not engage the historical development of the concept of angels, nor the possible distinction between מַלְאַךְ יְיָ *malʾak 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 Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

14 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 cognitively licensed by the shared underlying principle of agency and the functional identity of *speaking* versus *acting* on someone else's behalf.

15 See, e.g., Freedman and Willoughby in Freedman et al., מַלְאָךְ, TDOT, 314–315. In contrast to the generalizing development of the term "messenger" in English (see the previous note), the semantic range of מַלְאָךְ 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.

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

17 See Excursus 1, "מַלְאָךְ and Its Co-referential Role Terms." (This article's excursuses contain extended discussion on supporting topics, especially those that are less directly theological.)

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.[18]

2 "What goes without saying" in depictions of messengers

I will now establish a largely overlooked narrative convention in the ancient Near East, regarding messengers.[19] 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.[20] In order for the delivered message to be authentic—or the delegated task to be legitimate—messenger norms and protocols had to be followed.[21]

The overall process was apparently conceptualized as a unified whole. This is what cognitive linguists call a "script."[22] 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.[23]

Biblical narratives skip many details of the messaging process.[24] 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:[25]

וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד אֶל־יוֹאָב	David sent [word] to Joab:
שְׁלַח אֵלַי אֶת־אוּרִיָּה הַחִתִּי	"Send me Uriah the Hittite."
וַיִּשְׁלַח יוֹאָב אֶת־אוּרִיָּה אֶל־דָּוִד׃	So Joab sent Uriah to David.

18 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).

19 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.

20 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.

21 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 Stein, "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."

22 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.

23 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.

24 See Excursus 3, "Elision in Biblical Depictions of Messaging."

25 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.

Most of the messaging process is elided; the very existence of the king's messenger is merely implied.[26] 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?

2.1 The cognitive processing of elision

Elision in a text 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.[27] And we also apply it to our language, by using the *depiction* of a salient part of that script to conjure the whole of it.[28] 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."[29]

Because the messaging script was *conventionalized* in the ancient Near East,[30] the Bible's composers could rely upon their audience to be familiar with it whenever it depicted messaging.[31] 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.

2.2 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.[32] We can be sure that the recipient is keenly interested in the sender's identity, as the latter's authority will condition how to respond.[33] Hence, expeditious announcement must have been the norm for this step.[34]

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26 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.

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

28 At issue is a text's pragmatics: how words are *used to communicate* beyond their surface meaning. To give a related example, an ostensibly "superfluous" word will naturally be construed as having unstated extra meaning given two basic assumptions of communication: the speaker—in bothering to mention something—was attempting to be *informative*; and in order to remain *relevant*, the speaker would have said only what was needed to get the point across (Yule, *Pragmatics*, 35–46).

29 Gibbs, "Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy," 68–69.

30 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 Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

31 The messaging script was likewise used to depict messaging by the Judahite author of Arad ostracon 24:18–19 (ca. 600 BCE): הנה שלחתי להעיד בכם הים "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.

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

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

34 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 familiar messengers needed to distinguish their own words from their masters'. 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.

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.[35] 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 the establishment of that authority 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.[36] Furthermore, it is evident that many messengers of Israel's God are depicted using the same convention.[37] 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 evident from the depiction of their subsequent speech or behavior.

3 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.[38] 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 been a topic of study in both cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics—is the best standard for weighing the construals of a text.[39]

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

36 See Excursus 7, "More Elision of the 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 (Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 186).

37 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).

38 Is it even possible to reconstruct the reliable construal of the text's ancient audience (in the sense of its "implied reader")? 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" (Greenstein, "Reading Pragmatically," 112). Nonetheless, assertions can be graded along a continuum of plausibility. Narrative conventions (such as the RR convention identified in this article) sit at the objective end of the scale. Furthermore, scholars can establish the objective grounds for judging one construal as more persuasive than another.

39 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" (Noble, *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.

3.1 How the mind handles language

I am interested here in what is called *online* processing[40]—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.[41] 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 operations described are not discretionary.[42]

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.)[43] 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.[44] 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.[45] 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.[46]

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.[47] 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.

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40 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 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.

42 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" (Harman, "Will Genes Resonate in the Future?"); see also Kahneman, *Thinking*, 29, 77. The idea of heuristic artifice should be familiar to theologians who discuss a *personal* God who converses with people and dispatches agents—an analogous reification and abstraction of spiritual reality.

43 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).

44 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").

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

46 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 Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

47 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).

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.[48]

I will sum up our parser's text-processing approach via an informal rhyme:[49]

It jumps to what fits,
then with confidence quits.

4 Obscured origins and theological solutions

As I noted at the start, most recent scholars—especially historians of religion—have perceived Gen 18:1–15[50] as depicting an angelophany (or theophany) in which the divine messengers (or deity) were not recognized as such until after delivering their message.[51] Although interpreters' explanations differ in their details, I will refer to this now-standard position schematically as the "obscured-origin" (OO) construal.

One prominent proponent is James Kugel, who in 2003 described this biblical passage as an "encounter with unrecognized angels." He opined that "Abraham seems to be in some sort of fog" about their identity.[52] In more recent work (2017), Kugel concluded that Abraham's "fog" persists at least two verses longer than the professor had previously thought—namely, through verse 16.[53]

Kugel continues to presuppose that recognition of the deity's (divine) messengers is so momentous that it cannot be assumed. If it is not stated outright or inferable from the immediate proceedings, such a recognition must not have occurred. Consequently, Kugel then offers theological accountings for the observed "fog." In 2003, he concluded that the figures whom Abraham encountered were *in disguise*—hiding their identity as divine agents. (A common interpretation is that Abraham is granted God's promise of progeny after having passed a hospitality test imposed by the disguised visitors.) In 2017, he modified his view and concluded that the entire visual experience of three visitors was meant to be construed by the reader as Abraham's own apparition—a visual illusion prompted by a non-visual encounter.[54]

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48 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" (Kahneman, *Thinking*, 75, 79).

49 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).

50 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 *ʾēlāyw*) 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).

51 See, e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 131; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 206–207; Westermann, *Genesis*, 276–277; Greenstein, "God of Israel," 57*; Sarna, *Genesis*, 128; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 8–11; De Regt, *Participants in Old Testament Texts*, 76–77; Kugel, *God of Old*, as quoted below; Bolin, "The Role of Exchange," 44–47; Cotter, *Genesis*, 117–119; Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 47, 79; Wenham, *Genesis*, 45; 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"; Potter, *Angelology*, 31; Kugel, *Great Shift*, as quoted below. An exception is Knafl, *Forming God*, who construes two theophanies yet remains undecided as to whether Abraham and Jacob are aware of them right away; 109–120. On whether this passage depicts a direct theophanic encounter between God and Abraham, see below.

52 Kugel, *God of Old*, 10, 12.

53 Ibid., 6, 348n5; cf. idem, *God of Old*, 13.

54 Kugel, *Great Shift*, 5–7, 12. (Although Kugel does not mention it, his "apparition" construal is akin to that of Moses Maimonides, *Guide* 2:42.)

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,[55] 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.[56] 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*, such as assuming that the visitors have made recourse to disguise (as in Kugel's 2003 interpretation), or that the externally situated narration actually depicts Abraham's perceptual experience (as in Kugel's 2017 interpretation). 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).[57] 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 nearly as much of a "fog" as Abraham himself.[58] 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.

5 Gen 18:1 and the expectation of imminent communication

Our passage begins:[59]

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְיָ בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא . . .
Wayyērāʾ ʾēlāyw Yhwh bəʾēlonê mamrēʾ . . .
Yahweh _____ (to) him at the Oaks of Mamre. . . .

55 Citing a similar narrative convention of recognition, John Lyons has argued against the OO construal on the grounds of parsimony. (He would not argue from the agency-related convention that I adduce here, because he views Abraham's visitors as *directly* embodying the deity.) He reasons that "Abraham's . . . ability to recognize YHWH in every other relevant text should create a strong presumption towards just such a recognition here" (Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 159–161; see also 265).

56 For the implicit underlying principle of interpretation in pragmatics, see above, note 47. 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).

57 The OO construal yields a picture that, according to Von Rad, is "strange and singular in the Old Testament" (204). Likewise in Canaanite and other ancient Near Eastern literature and epigraphy: there is "no basis" for the notion that a deity appears *in disguise* in human form (Hamori, *When Gods Were Men*, 81, 149).

58 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" (Miller, *Mysterious Encounters*, 7; emphasis added). Yet I will contend that much of the ostensible ambiguity can be resolved; see below.

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

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.[60] 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.[61] 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 promise? It is a function of the opening verb, whose root is ראה *r-ʾ-h* with a Niphal stem.[62] Usually it is rendered as "appeared."

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. He first posits a prebiblical usage in which our verb denotes "the appearance of God at a spot made sacred by this appearance," citing our instance in that connection.[63] Long ago, our verb must have had a fairly literal, "visual" sense.

In the biblical text as we know have it, however, Fuhs holds that this verse's verb does not indicate a visible theophany; rather, it has evolved into a mere "stylistic device used to introduce a narrative culminating in a promise uttered by the deity."[64] Let me recast this idea in a more general and cognitively based formulation, as follows: our verb is denoting *the advent of a communication event*. When our verb is applied to persons—human or divine—this is by far the most common denotation.[65]

Nonetheless, as we have seen, many interpreters consider "the appearance of God" to be the salient meaning in this instance. So I will treat the two possibilities as competing denotations for the parser to process. That is, our parser begins with the assumption that two meanings of our verb seem workable: Yahweh made a literal "appearance" to Abraham, or Yahweh "made contact with" him.[66] The parser seeks a way to make sense of the story that involves either possibility.[67] (By default, the parser prefers to construe the verb in terms of its conventional usage, which is the second option; but the first 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*.[68] No appearance or contact can occur until Abraham notices it as such. Thus 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. After all, that is the narrator's promise.

The audience's parser knows that in our verb's most common usages—to denote the establishment of contact between two parties—it is often followed *directly* by the message content.[69] For example, that usage occurred prominently in the previous episode, in which Abram's deity opened a fateful dialogue with him (17:1):

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60 On participants to whom others are anchored as being the audience's "center of attention," see Runge, "Pragmatic Effects," 90.

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

62 "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-ʾ-h* relates to seeing (visual perception).

63 Fuhs, TDOT 13:236. Our verb is clearly used in the "visually perceptible" sense when applied to inanimate objects. What is at issue is the usage when applied to persons.

64 Ibid. A nearly identical analysis appears in Vetter (TLOT 3:1182–83).

65 As Fuhs states, even in theological usage our verb "is not a specifically theological term but remains epistemological" (ibid., 13:229). See Excursus 9, "Niphal ראה as a Verb of Communication."

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

67 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."

68 See "Recognition of the sender's agent (and of the sender)" in Excursus 9.

69 See "The scope of our verb's semantics" in Excursus 9.

וַיֵּרָ֥א יְהוָ֖ה אֶל־אַבְרָ֑ם **וַיֹּ֥אמֶר אֵלָ֖יו** . . .
wayyērāʾ Yhwh ʾel-Abram, wayyōʾmer ʾēlāyw . . .
Yahweh made contact with Abram, and said to him . . .

In contrast, in the present case, the narration proceeds instead with a circumstantial clause (v. 1b):

וְהוּא֙ יֹשֵׁ֣ב פֶּֽתַח־הָאֹ֔הֶל כְּחֹ֖ם הַיּֽוֹם׃
wə·hûʾ yōšēb petaḥ-hāʾōhel kə·ḥōm hayyôm.
. . . he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

The 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.[70] 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.

Third, the parser also wonders: *Why are you telling me this data about place and time?*[71] 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.[72] 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.[73]

6 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.[74] 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).[75] So in making sense of our story, the parser could not help but enlist this knowledge about Yahweh.[76]

70 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.

71 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).

72 In contrast, 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 reading is valid *grammatically*—but not from a *discourse perspective*. Simply because this clause follows the previous clause, it is ineluctably drafted to serve the parser's need to interpret that first clause.

73 Malbim (פירוש, at v. 1) 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."

74 See "When an agent functions as an intermediary" in Excursus 9.

75 For a plain-sense analysis that excludes Yahweh from the scene of the angel's encounter with Hagar, see Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

76 On agency as a highly available concept (cognitively speaking), see above, § 1.

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.

7 The designation אֲנָשִׁים in light of cognitive linguistics

The narrator now introduces new characters via the term אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm* (v. 2):

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו	He lifted up his eyes
וַיַּרְא	and looked,
וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים נִצָּבִים עָלָיו . . .	and behold, three *ʾănāšîm* were standing in front of him. (ESV, adapted)

This noun (the plural form of אִישׁ *ʾîš*) 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.[77] 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 *ʾîš*. It is employed in this way, for example, in the well-known biblical title אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים *ʾîš ʾĕlōhîm* ("Agent of God").[78]

In other words, in the taxonomy of terms within the agency domain, a מַלְאָךְ *malʾāk* ("messenger") is a type of אִישׁ *ʾîš* (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 of agency, namely representation: *this party is acting on behalf of another party* (who may or may not be present).[79] 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 primal and schematic meaning, אִישׁ serves as the default label in already-established agency situations. This explains why אִישׁ 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.[80]

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77 Working title: "The Hierarchy of Agent Labels." This manuscript is drawn from a dissertation in progress.

78 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.

79 In other words, a designation as אִישׁ 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.

80 The pragmatics of label specificity will be explored below. See also Excursus 10, "On the Noun אִישׁ 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 Stein, "Angels by Another Name").

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 אִישׁ.[81] 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.[82]

8 Evaluating the choice of label (lexical options)

Returning to our Abraham story and its referential use of the noun אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm*, 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 terms are known to be available.[83] 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: מַלְאָכִים *malʾākîm* ("messengers, angels").[84] What if it had been used already here, in 18:2?

וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה מַלְאָכִים נִצָּבִים עָלָיו . . .[85]*
**wə·hinnēh šəlošâ malʾākîm niṣṣābîm ʿalāyw . . .*
*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 מַלְאָךְ *malʾāk* is a type of אִישׁ *ʾîš* 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.[86] And when a statement is more informative than required, it is interpreted as carrying an extra implication or affective overtone.[87] Against the backdrop of a taxonomic hierarchy, its communicative effect is to call attention to whatever features distinguish the more specific

81 The fact that elsewhere אִישׁ 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.

82 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" (Blutner, "Pragmatics and the Lexicon," 492). In the present case, "correct" is equivalent to "yielding a coherent and informative result."

83 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 structuralist 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).

84 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.

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

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

87 See above, note 28.

category from the more generic one.[88] 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").

Over-specification 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.)[89] 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,[90] the text's composer(s) evidently chose to avoid it; they must have been satisfied with the unmarked—and therefore expected—designation.[91]

In light of this alternative label, what then is the import of our verse's actual term, אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm*? 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 "agents."[92] 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.[93]

9 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 אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm* 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

88 Cruse, "Pragmatics of Lexical Specificity," 163; idem, *Lexical Semantics*, 153–155; cf. Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 187.
89 For the usage evidence to support my differential characterization of the nouns מַלְאָךְ and אִישׁ, see Stein, "The Hierarchy of Agent Labels." This usage distinction is consistent with the root meaning לאך "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."
90 For the ancient audience, the precise pragmatic import is not clear to me. I surmise that this alternative label 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.
91 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 מַלְאָךְ 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.
92 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 אֲנָשִׁים would disappear.
93 My emulation of the parser's construal of אֲנָשִׁים 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 וְהִנֵּה): 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.

(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 אֲנָשִׁים, 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.[94] Thus the narrator's opening promise has been fulfilled.[95]

The messaging script, combined with the selected construal of אֲנָשִׁים, now enables the parser to answer pressing questions that the narrative has raised:[96] *How will the deity communicate with Abraham?* Ah, via these three agents.[97] *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.[98]

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 *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.[99] 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.[100] Abraham behaves just as would be expected of a devotee who knowingly encounters his deity's representatives.[101] Furthermore, when they eventually convey a message (starting in verse 10), the audience finds the situation to be consistent with the RR convention; they have no doubt that Abraham is aware that those words are spoken in his deity's name.

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94 See "Recognition of the sender's agent (and of the sender)" in Excursus 9.

95 Furthermore, that conclusion is consistent with two additional expectations that the messaging script evokes; see Excursus 4. Thus they reinforce the parser's conclusion that Abraham and his visitors have confirmed their respective identities with each other.

96 In somewhat more technical terms: construing אֲנָשִׁים 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 Ramscar 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" (Ramscar and Port, "Categorization," 92).

97 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.

98 Readers might ask: 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; see above, note 47.

99 Under some conditions, the race for construal may be reactivated retroactively. 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, reconsideration takes more processing effort than does arriving at the initial conclusion; consequently, the subsequent evidence for an alternative construal must be *stronger* than was necessary to reach the first construal. With regard to Gen 18:1–2, I see no such evidence. (Similarly for Jacob in Gen 32, below.) See further Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

100 Such details include: repetition of the verb וַיַּרְא *wayyarʾ* ("and saw/looked"); Abraham's running and prostration; his form of address to the visitors as he issues his invitation; etc. See the commentaries cited above, note 7.

101 On Abraham's treatment of his visitors as matching the normal protocol for receiving long-distance (human) messengers, see "Messaging protocols in Genesis 18" at the end of Excursus 8. On the narrative convention that prompted the audience to construe the name *Yhwh* in verse 13 as referring most directly to Yahweh's *agent*, see Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

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.	When will Abraham notice what's going on? In which manner will this event occur—by message or directly?
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.	How, exactly, will Abraham experience the advent of communication?
2a	Three אֲנָשִׁים 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.	Does Abraham recognize that these figures are Yahweh's agents?
—	(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.	How does Abraham now respond to the advent of communication? What is the message's content?

10 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 that "after a whole night of supposed wrestling, Jacob is still in a fog."[102]

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.[103] 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

102 *Great Shift*, 10; so also idem, *God of Old*, 28; Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 41. Baḥya ben Asher (ביאור, at v. 27), Speiser (*Genesis*, 256), Sarna (*Genesis*, 211), Hamilton (*Genesis*, 332), and Cotter (*Genesis*, 245) 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" (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 322).

103 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" (Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 84).

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.[104]

- 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 audience's discourse model.[105] 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 *ʾîš* (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."[106] Although the label אִישׁ corresponds semantically to its plural form (אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm*) in 18:2, here it is somehow less informative.[107]

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."[108] He then recasts this defect as a virtue: the story's enigmas must be intentional and artful.[109]

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 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.

10.1 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:[110]

104 According to Ehrlich, the notice that Jacob was "alone" serves to explain why nobody from his large household was available to save him from the intruder (Ehrlich, *Miqrāʾ Kiṣ·pšûṭô*, 92). 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.

105 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."

106 Cotter, *Genesis*, 245; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 320; 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" (Geller, "Struggle at the Jabbok," 46).

107 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, *Genesis*, 320; Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 179; Wenham, *Genesis*, 295). 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 וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה *wayyarʾ wə·hinnēh* that appeared in 18:2, none are employed here. (See "The Poetics of Point of View" in Berlin, *Poetics*, 55–82.)

108 Geller, "Struggle," 47.

109 Ibid. (Similarly, the literary theorist Roland Barthes' tentative foray into interpreting this story yielded incoherent results—and tellingly, that incoherence was celebrated; Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel," 138, 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 astutely ruled out the popular interpretation of this story as being the deity's *test* of Jacob, calling that view "illegitimate" (Geller, "Struggle," 48–49).

110 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.

וְיַעֲקֹב הָלַךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ	Jacob went on his way,
וַיִּפְגְּעוּ־בוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים:	and messengers of God encountered him.
וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָם	When he saw them, Jacob said,
מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה	"This is God's camp."
וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחֲנָיִם:	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).[111] Thus 32:2–3 evokes the previous promise of divine protection (28:15):[112]

וְהִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וּשְׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־תֵּלֵךְ

"Here, I am with you, / I will watch over you wherever you go. . . ." (Fox)

Yet that evocation strangely seems to lead nowhere. The prevailing construal views this passage as both laconic and unconnected to what follows.[113] As Von Rad concludes: "An impassable barrier is placed for the interpreter."[114] 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* מַלְאָכִים *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.[115] It also accustoms the audience to the idea that Jacob can recognize a divine messenger when he encounters one[116]—even if that messenger should, for whatever reason, seem to oppose him.[117]

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 מַלְאָכִים *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.

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

112 Rashbam (פירוש, at 32:2–3).

113 E.g., Ehrlich, *Miqrāʾ Ki·pšûṭô*, 91; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 314; Westermann, *Genesis*, 504; and Sarna, *Genesis*, 208. Speiser, who views this Mahanaim encounter as one of Jacob's tests (Speiser, *Genesis*, 256), does comment—but only vaguely—that "the present incident has an inner connection with the encounter at Peniel" (ibid., 254). A striking exception is Moses Maimonides, who explicitly links 32:2–3 with what follows (Maimonides, *Guide* 2:42). He construes the clause "and angels of God encountered him" as prolepsis. That is, verses 2 and 25 *refer to the same encounter*. (Unfortunately, Maimonides does not address the narrative incoherence created by construing the *plural* label מַלְאָכִים *mal'ākîm* in verse 2 and the *singular* label אִישׁ *'îš* in verse 25 as co-references to the same party.)

114 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 313. Like many commentators as far back as Ibn Ezra (12th c.), Wenham concludes that "Jacob is still being accompanied by God" (*Genesis*, 281). Luzzatto specifies that the angels had been sent "in order to reassure [Jacob] so that he would not be afraid of his brother" (פירוש, at 32:2–3). However, Ehrlich 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 (*Miqrāʾ Ki·pšûṭô*, 91). In the Discussion, I will suggest an interpretation that reconciles these views.

115 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."

116 When the narrator informs us that מַלְאֲכֵי 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 Baḥya ben Asher (on v. 2) note that Jacob's ability to recognize angels is salient here.

117 Like many commentators, Wenham raises "the possibility that they [the angels in vv. 2–3] might be hostile (32:23–31)" (Wenham, *Genesis*, 281). For when the Hebrew Bible applies the verb פגע בְּ *p-g-ʿ 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 67). 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:[118] *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 those messengers 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* מַלְאָכִים *malʾākîm (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 agents*[119]—namely, the four hundred אִישׁ *ʾîš* ("agents") who are reportedly approaching under Esau's direction (v. 7)?[120] 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).[121] *Well, what about those* מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים *malʾăkê ĕlōhîm (messengers of God) that Jacob saw nearby? Might they perhaps be a resource?*

Agency is thus increasingly salient in the audience's mind, while the מַלְאֲכֵי 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:[122]

וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ Jacob was left alone.[123] (CJPS)

In light of the deity's abiding promise of protection, the parser might well construe this clause ironically—for the מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים are not unexpected.[124] And with that, the audience hears the next clause in the narrative—which is of course the crucial one:

וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר׃ And an *ʾîš* wrestled[125] with him until the break of dawn. (CJPS, adapted)

10.2 Fixing a referent—and filling a void

Verse 25 thus 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;

118 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 28 and 71.

119 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 מַלְאָכִים 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 מַלְאָכִים.

120 These figures function as "agents" in that they are subordinated to Esau and serve his interests.

121 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.

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

123 Or: "Jacob alone was left" on his side of the divide (Daniel Shevitz, personal communication, 27 June 2018).

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

125 Below, in the Discussion, I will suggest that this standard rendering is misleading.

the referent's identifiability; and its cognitive accessibility as indicated by the manner in which the text refers to that referent.[126] Let us examine each factor, in turn.

Regarding the *content* of the referring expression אִישׁ *ʾîš*, my proposed sense as "agent" would make sense as a candidate, as with its plural in 18:2. This label seems to be suited to this situation, as attested elsewhere in the Bible.[127] Thus, the active cognitive frame of agency would tend to evoke the proposed "agent" sense of this noun.[128]

Regarding the referent's *identifiability*, the issue is whether the parser has enough information to assign this reference to a unique participant.[129] At first glance, the answer would appear to be no, because an indefinite noun merely focuses on the *class* to which its referent belongs.[130] 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.[131] 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 *malʾāk*, or one that anchored the referent to an existing character, such as מַלְאַךְ אֱלֹהִים *malʾak ʾĕlōhîm* (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.[132] 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.

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.[133] 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 *ʾîš* can be accessed is if he is somehow associated with another, more active entity.[134] In this case, there are two such entities (from v. 2)—namely the מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים *malʾăkê ĕlōhîm* 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 group[135]—which in this case is the

126 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.

127 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 *malʾāk* (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 *malʾāk*) 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.

128 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.

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

130 IBHS, 236 (§ 13.2.b).

131 Ariel, "Accessibility Theory," 16.

132 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.

133 Lambrecht, *Information Structure*, 100.

134 Ibid.

135 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").

מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים. This אִישׁ is thus identified as one of them.[136] 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): מַלְאָךְ. What if it had been used again in verse 25?

*וַיֵּאָבֵק מַלְאָךְ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר׃
*a messenger wrestled[137] 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.[138] 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 (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?*[139] In other words, the use of מַלְאָךְ would complicate the picture somewhat.[140]

In light of the potential for a marked label, a parser of the actual biblical text would conclude that its composer(s) preferred to use the unmarked—and therefore expected—designation, אִישׁ.[141] 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?[142] (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.[143] 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.

Meanwhile, the depicted 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

136 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 distributive and reciprocal usages. See Stein, "The Noun אִישׁ."

137 See the caution above, note 125.

138 Elsewhere when agents are dispatched to apply force or coercion against someone, מַלְאָךְ *mal'āk* is one of the designations for such agents (see above, note 127); see also 1 Sam 19:11, 14–15, 20–21.

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

140 Likewise an even more explicit and phonologically complex label would be construed as needlessly prolix (over-encoding) and thus bearing an additional connotation.

141 We can also ask: what if גֶּבֶר *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 גֶּבֶר is not passive, depressed, ill, disabled, or feeble; see Kosmala, "גֶּבֶר *gebher*.") It would indicate that its referent has not been previously active in the discourse model. In short, the label גֶּבֶר would only add to the passage's list of open questions—and processing costs.

142 As discussed above at note 105. The answer is that the label refers to someone who is already present—albeit obliquely—in the discourse model, as would be expected.

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

agent. Meanwhile, the RR convention applies to any agent whose designated activity involves a recipient with a need to know.[144] So for the parser, this condition would marshal the RR convention.

Consequently, it would go without saying that Jacob recognizes the sender's identity.[145] 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 apparent to each other, even at night.[146]

11 Discussion

The parser emulation method employed here may be too painstaking an approach to apply widely. Actual language processing handles a vast number of associated bits of information—far more 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.

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*.[147] That is, it ignores the original audience's familiarity with their own society's reliance upon agency (a reliance that had produced the RR convention). It also replaces the contextual meanings of the Niphal ראה *r-ʾ-h* verb and the noun אִישׁ *ʾîš* with mechanical and acontextual ones. Furthermore, the OO construal radically 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 in today's world. Furthermore, if we perceive Abraham as having shown unusually gracious hospitality to his unidentified visitors, there is stirring ethical guidance.[148] And in the conventional claim that both Abraham and Jacob

144 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.

145 The fact that Jacob has demonstrated his ability to recognize his deity's מַלְאָכִים *malʾākîm* (v. 3) likewise suggests that he would recognize the deity's אִישׁ *ʾîš* (v. 25). See above, note 116. However, this consideration is not decisive, given that the earlier perception took place during the daytime.

146 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*. See the Discussion below, at note 151. (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 that Jacob posed his question לדעת על איזה דבר הוא ממונה "in order to know what he [the angel] was tasked to do" (Kimḥi, פירוש, at v. 30); Naḥmanides, פירוש, 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?")

147 "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).

148 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).

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 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.

Given the impressive results of an RR construal, we now face an interesting question: *How does it 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 has theological implications, as demonstrated by the following observation and then a tentative interpretation.

11.1 How does an RR construal affect James Kugel's project?

In Kugel's ambitious project to describe the evolution of religious consciousness, he has found it remarkable that in the world of the Bible, "everyone knows . . . that the spiritual realm is always there, ready to intrude on the physical."[149] That is, biblical figures—including Abraham and Jacob—are regularly depicted as being engaged expeditiously by their deity. However, as discussed earlier, Kugel has also adopted the standard view that in several biblical accounts, the central figures take a while to realize who is addressing them. Exemplars include Abraham in Gen 18:1–15, and Jacob in 32:23–33, as we have seen. Needless to say, belabored and belated awareness is at odds with Kugel's more general finding. Happily, adopting an RR construal of Gen 18:1–15, 32:23–33, and similar visitation stories—as proposed here—would enable Kugel's project to present a more consistent picture of "the God of old."[150]

11.2 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*.[151]

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. The agent, who presumably possesses supernatural strength, would not be attempting to subjugate or harm Jacob, but rather to manage or pacify him. The presumed mission of protection appears to be a matter of *restraint*—both the restraint *of* Jacob and self-restraint *by* the angel.

This view is akin to that of Kimḥi: God sent the angel to Jacob in order to "strengthen his resolve, so as to not be scared of Esau."[152] The verb of encounter in verses 25–26, normally rendered as "wrestled," is extant nowhere else in ancient Hebrew—so its precise force is not clear. Several plain-sense rabbinic

149 Kugel, *The God of Old*, 15, 24.

150 The biblical narrator persistently treats not only Abraham's visitors but also Jacob's wrenched hip as existing quite apart from anyone's apperception of them (e.g., Gen 19:1; 32:32–33). This fact underscores that Kugel's "hallucinatory" reading is best classified as midrashic (acontextual); see the discussion already by Kimḥi, פירוש, at 32:26 (end).

151 The following exegesis is more speculative than my preceding analysis of the parser's operation. Theological interpretation involves more variables, our knowledge of the ancient audience's assumptions is less certain, and the boundaries of the relevant context are less clear.

152 Kimḥi at 32:25. And then in order for the ascribed stratagem to achieve its purpose, Jacob would have to know the identity of the figure who is detaining him. This implies that Kimḥi adopted an RR construal; and his comments at vv. 26 and 27 indeed suggest that view.

commentators favor a meaning closer to "hugged," based on a plausible Aramaic cognate (assuming a well-known type of interchange of guttural consonants) attested in the Talmud.[153] Whatever the denoted activity was, it led to Jacob's injury, an outcome that suggests he was resisting physically. Even so, Kimḥi plausibly holds that the angel's intent was not to *harm* Jacob.[154]

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."[155]

> 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 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.[156]

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.

12 Summary and conclusions

12.1 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. Evidently such a script licensed the "recipient recognition" (RR) convention in the construal of narrative depictions of messaging.

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153 The commentators include Rashi, Bekhor Shor, Baḥya ben Asher, and Luzzatto.

154 In support of this interpretation are the facts that Jacob's injury was not inflicted right away, and that it was of a temporary nature (cf. his bowing seven times in 33:3).

155 Patty Wipfler, *Listening to Children: Healing Children's Fears* (Palo Alto, CA: Parents Leadership Institute, 1990), 4. 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."

156 Ibid., 5–10.

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 undertook a major, comprehensive reassessment of the Niphal ראה *r-ʾ-h* verb as applied to persons. And I posited an unusual view of אִישׁ *ʾîš* provisionally, in order to test its explanatory power.

A fourth key factor was a careful delineation, 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.

12.2 Methodological conclusions

1. Consideration of cognition (in particular, of how the messaging script is deployed) can shift the burden of proof regarding the meaning of narrative details 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.
2. 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.

12.3 Substantive conclusions

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. The verb ראה *r-ʾ-h* in the Niphal stem is almost always used in a communication context; it usually denotes the advent of a communication event. It is used to point to something unusual about that event.
5. This study validates the hypothesis that the noun אִישׁ *ʾîš* 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.
6. 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: that passage sets up expectations that are crucial to making sense of what follows in 32:25 ff.
7. 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.
8. 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, such a presupposition results in midrash.
9. In order to truly appreciate midrashic interpretations, we must first comprehend the plain sense that they are departing from.
10. 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.

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Excursus 1: מַלְאָךְ and Its Co-referential Role Terms

The Bible repeatedly uses the term מַלְאָךְ *malʾāk* ("messenger") in co-reference with other role terms. To give seven examples:

- The two sets of מַלְאָכִים *malʾākîm* whom King Balak sends to Balaam (Num 22:4–5; 24:12) are also labeled as זְקֵנִים *zəqēnîm* ("elders"; 22:7), אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm* ("agents" [see Excursus 10]; vv. 9, 20), שָׂרִים *śārîm* ("dignitaries"; vv. 13–14, 15, 21, 35), and עֲבָדִים *ʿăbādîm* ("royal officials"; v. 18).
- The אֲנָשִׁים whom Joshua sends to Jericho (Josh 2:1–4, 9, 14, 17, 23) are also labeled as מַלְאָכִים after their mission is complete (6:17, 25).
- The נְעָרִים *nəʿārîm* ("protégés") whom the fugitive David sends to Nabal (1 Sam 25:5, 8, 9, 12) are also labeled as עַבְדֵי דָוִד *ʿabdê dāwid* ("David's servants"; v. 10) before being called מַלְאָכִים by Abigail's servant (v. 14) and then נְעָרִים again by her (v. 25).
- The עַבְדֵי דָוִד whom David sends to Abigail (1 Sam 25:40) are later called מַלְאֲכֵי דָוִד *malʾākê dāwid* ("David's messengers") by the same narrator (v. 42).
- The סָרִיס *sārîs* ("officer-eunuch") whom the king sends to summon a particular prophet (1 Kgs 22:9) is later called a מַלְאָךְ by the narrator (v. 13); the same usages appear in the parallel account in 2 Chr 18:8, 12.
- During Jehu's coup d'état against King Joram of Israel, the king orders that a רַכָּב *rakkāb* ("horseman") be dispatched (2 Kgs 9:17). Two parties then called רֹכֵב הַסּוּס *rokēb hassûs* ("horse rider") by the narrator (vv. 18, 19) are each designated as הַמַּלְאָךְ *hammalʾāk* ("the messenger") by the lookout who reports on their progress to the king (vv. 18, 20).
- The מַלְאָכִים whom King David sends to Ammon (1 Chr 19:2) are also labeled as עַבְדֵי דָוִד ("David's servants"; vv. 2, 4) and as אֲנָשִׁים ("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."[157] On the contrary, "real messengers" were often designated by various labels—and this appears to have been conventional practice.

157 Kugel, *The God of Old*, 34.

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.[158] 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."[159]

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 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."[160]

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 glimpsing divinity only out of the corner of our eye—and sometimes only in retrospect. Rather than seeing God directly, we tend to receive indirect messages.

158 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).

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

160 Ibid., 40.

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 שׁלח *š-l-ḥ* ("sent") or קרא *q-r-ʾ* ("summoned") is often used with an elided direct object; thus the messenger's very existence is assumed—not to mention the successful discharge of that 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;[161] 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.[162] 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.

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.

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

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

Excursus 4: 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.[163]

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 (לְמִי *lə·mî*) 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 (לְמִי) are you?" (v. 13). And when Boaz first spotted a stranger gleaning in his field, his first question to his supervisor was "Whose (לְמִי) protégée is that?" (Ruth 2:5).

Even when the interrogative pronoun used in biblical dialogue is simply מִי *mî* (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.[164] 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).

In the ancient Near East, an interlocutor's affiliation had immediate ramifications, due to a societal commonplace: Whenever one person encountered another, they had to promptly establish their relative social rank, simply in order to know how to address—and otherwise express themselves to—each other with appropriate deference. Their words and gestures (bowing) were contingent upon their relative rank. And in establishing rank whenever *agency* was involved, what counted was the social rank of the *principal*—not that of the agent.[165] These societal norms created a pressing need for the recipient of a message to know right away who sent the messenger.

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

164 Ehrlich, *Miqrā' Ki·pšûṭô*, 283.

165 See Excursus 3 in Stein, "The Iceberg Effect."

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 (quite 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 an emissary to begin by announcing whom he was representing, and to bear greetings from the principal.[166]
- Mari's resident ambassador in Babylon (ca. 2000 BCE) gave an account of the arrival of a messenger from his city, whom he then accompanied during the delivery phase. The latter 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.[167]
- 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 . . ."[168] 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.

166 Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 137–138; emphasis added.
167 Munn-Rankin, "Diplomacy in Western Asia," 102–103.
168 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 831, ll. 87–91 (punctuation adapted).

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 the announcement explicit is 1 Sam 25:40:[169]

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַבְדֵי דָוִד אֶל־אֲבִיגַיִל הַכַּרְמֶלָה	David's servants came to Abigail at Carmel;
וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלֶיהָ לֵאמֹר	they spoke to her, saying:
דָּוִד שְׁלָחָנוּ אֵלַיִךְ	"David sent us to you—
לְקַחְתֵּךְ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:	to make you his wife."

Unconventionally, as David's messengers report to Abigail his directive to them, they are speaking *about* him.[170] 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.[171]

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 the message as your sender dictates it to you*. 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:[172]

וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד עֲשָׂרָה נְעָרִים	David dispatched ten protégés;
וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד לַנְּעָרִים	David instructed these protégés:
עֲלוּ כַרְמֶלָה וּבָאתֶם אֶל־נָבָל	"Go up to Carmel [until] you come to Nabal.
וּשְׁאַלְתֶּם־לוֹ בִּשְׁמִי לְשָׁלוֹם:	Extend greetings to him *in my name*.
וַאֲמַרְתֶּם . . .	And say . . ."

Likewise, Gen 32:5; 45:9; and Exod 3:13–15 provide a glimpse of this step in the messaging script. In all four cases, however, a compelling dramatic reason exists for the unusual depiction of a message's dictation. 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 highlights Joseph's newfound resolve to 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.

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

170 "The messenger while delivering the message speaks (although not always) as if he were the sender in first person" (Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 191; cf. Miller, *Representation of Speech*, 379).

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

172 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 the Recipient's Recognition of a Messenger's Principal

Joshua 2:3–7 begins:

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֶלֶךְ יְרִיחוֹ אֶל־רָחָב לֵאמֹר
הוֹצִיאִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הַבָּאִים אֵלַיִךְ
Wayyišlaḥ melek yərîḥô ʾel-rāḥāb lēʾmōr:
hôṣîʾî ha·ʾănāšîm ha·bāʾîm ʾēlayik . . .
The king of Jericho sent [deputies] to Rahab, saying:
"Bring out the agents[173] who came to you. . . ."

This passage exemplifies a typical formula: *wayyišlaḥ* [*pəlōnî*] . . . *lēʾmōr* ("[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.[174] 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's quoted contents. Rather, the recipient's awareness goes without saying, for the audience can infer it via the evoked messaging script.

Similarly, consider the depictions of 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 כֹּה אָמַר [פְּלֹנִי] *kōh ʾāmar* [*pəlōnî*] ("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 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.[175] As linguists would put it, the narration's report of this formula must be pragmatically motivated.[176] Ascertaining its precise import is beyond the scope of this article.[177] It suffices to observe that the selective insertion of this formula bears the hallmarks of signaling for dramatic impact.[178]

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173 On this sense, see below, Excursus 10.

174 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.

175 See the useful programmatic discussion in Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 15–28; see also above, note 28.

176 "Marked messages indicate marked situations" (Huang, "Anaphora," 298). Tellingly, the biblical narrator uses this formula solely 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 [פְּלֹנִי] כֹּה אָמַר is employed expressively before recounting the content of a character's messages.

177 My provisional analysis of the contexts for this formula's usage suggests that it serves to highlight that the following message is unexpected; that message is either *surprising to the audience* or it *clashes with the recipient's will*. This communication-oriented explanation is consistent with the functional analysis by H. Van Dyke Parunak for usage within the book of Jeremiah (Parunak, "Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotation Formulas," 505–7, 515).

178 This finding augments the otherwise astute analysis of Samuel Meier, who struggled to explain why the Bible seldom depicts messengers' identification of their principal (Meier, *Speaking of Speaking*, 273–98, 321; idem, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 186–191).

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."[179] 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.[180]

Ostensible distinctions between human and divine messengers are negligible for our purposes. For example, the Bible mentions a sword only with regard to apparently divine מַלְאָכִים *malʾākîm* (messengers). Yet this attribute cannot be unique to them, for we can safely assume that some human מַלְאָכִים 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).

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."[181] 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 even to the agents of the Bible's deity, 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 some party is addressed by either מַלְאַךְ יְיָ *malʾak Yhwh* ("Yahweh's messenger") or מַלְאַךְ אֱלֹהִים *malʾak ʾĕlōhîm* ("God's messenger"). But how do the messages' actual recipients (in the narrative) know this? We are never told. However, given that the *text's audience* already knows the sender's identity, our convention must be in play: the characters' awareness goes without saying.[182]

Furthermore, only if we assume the existence of such a convention can we readily explain why the recipients react in the dramatic 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).[183]

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.

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179 Meier, "Angel of Yahweh," 53.

180 See above, note 18.

181 Meier, "Angel I," 46–47.

182 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 מַלְאַךְ יְיָ *malʾak 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.

183 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. (See above, note 170.) Such a practice is cognitively licensed by agency metonymy; in a narrative depiction, the motive for such wording is immediacy (see Stein, "Angels by Another Name").

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

וְאַךְ אֶת־הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֹתוֹ תַּעֲשֶׂה׃
wə·ʾak ʾet-haddābār ʾăšer-ʾădabbēr ʾēlêkā ʾōtô taʿăśeh.
. . . 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 מַלְאַךְ יְיָ *malʾak Yhwh* by the narrator—has been blocking his path. The narrator states:

וַיַּרְא אֶת־מַלְאַךְ יְיָ נִצָּב בַּדֶּרֶךְ
wayyarʾ ʾet-malʾak Yhwh niṣṣāb badderek
. . . he saw the angel of the Lord standing in his way (ESV)

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 left as an implicature.[184] Sight and insight are so closely intertwined that the latter is conventionally assumed from the former (by conceptual metonymy) unless it is denied outright.[185]

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):

וְאֶפֶס אֶת־הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֹתוֹ תְדַבֵּר
wə·ʾepes ʾet-haddābār ʾăšer-ʾădabbēr ʾēlêkā ʾōtô tədabbēr.
but only the word that I speak to you, / that (alone) may you speak. (Fox)

This phrasing echoes Yahweh's directive, quoted above.[186] As the addressee of both utterances, Balaam could hardly have escaped the conclusion that their first-person inflections refer to the same party.[187] At the same time, the angel's mission would be seen as 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 מַלְאַךְ יְיָ."[188] However, let us take into 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

184 Baruch Levine comments without elaboration: "When Balaam is enabled to see the armed angel, he immediately recognizes him as such" (Levine, *Numbers*, 158).

185 See Grossberg, "Visual World." Alternatively, recognition is part of the lexical meaning of the verb ראה *rāʾâ* "to see"; see San Roque et al., "Universal Meaning Extensions of Perception Verbs."

186 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.

187 As Jacob Milgrom comments: "The angel, here identified with the 'I' of the Lord, thus speaks or acts as the Lord's surrogate" (Milgrom, *Numbers*, 192). See also above, note 183.

188 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 Stein, "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.

the success of their ventures."[189] Hence when a figure (labeled a מַלְאַךְ יְיָ) 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.[190] 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.[191]

In Judges 13:2–23, a messenger (labeled a מַלְאַךְ יְיָ 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 הָאֱלֹהִים *ʾîš hā·ʾĕlōhîm* ("God's agent")[192] 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 and instructions to Yahweh? The answer is not given. Apparently our narrative convention obtains even here.

Messaging protocols in Genesis 18. As I explain in the body of this article regarding Gen 18:1–15, communication is established between Yahweh and Abraham before the end of verse 2. Here I must note that the actual message delivery is not depicted until verse 10. What the intervening verses describe are the usual human-messenger protocols that follow *arrival* but precede *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.[193] Normally such messaging protocols go without saying in biblical depictions. The reasons for their being spelled out in Genesis 18 are worthy of study; however, that topic is beyond the scope of this article.

189 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).

190 The fact that characters like Gideon may resist, or even object to, what a divine envoy tells them does not mean that they fail to realize that the envoy is indeed divine, and that the message's source is none other than Israel's God. Indeed, the Bible is filled with characters—including "righteous" designated agents such as Abraham, Moses, and Samuel—who hesitate to fully accept what they know their deity has (directly or indirectly) told them.

191 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 *ʾîš ʾĕlōhîm*)"—even though he had already 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*, 432; De Vries, *1 Kings*, 222). My claim here is that Gideon's "seeing" expresses a similar idea.

192 On this rendering of the construct expression אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים—which occurs 76 times in the Bible (usually in definite reference)—see above, note 78; below, Excursus 10, "On the Noun אִישׁ as Denoting an Agent."

193 Meier, *Messenger*, 137–161.

Excursus 9: Niphal ראה as a Verb of Communication

In order to ascertain what our verb[194] means as it opens Gen 18:1, we must consider its usage in general.[195] Typically, scholars hold that the Niphal stem of the verb ראה *r-ʾ-h* basically denotes a sensory perception;[196] and it is widely granted that when applied to persons (human or divine), our verb is seldom used in a manner that is connected with visual experience.[197] According to some observers, however, the focus is never on the visuals; rather, it introduces divine speech, particularly a promise.[198]

Indeed, of our verb's 63 instances, 60 of them (95%) occur in *communication situations*, often involving messaging.[199] This finding strongly suggests that our verb belongs to the cognitive frame of communication.[200] See Table 2.

Semantically speaking, our verb's usage is exemplified by the 13 cases in which it immediately (or almost immediately) introduces a message that is depicted as direct speech. In an additional 6 very similar cases, our verb's clause not only opens a speech frame that introduces the spoken message, but also highlights the conditions under which communication is established.

Pragmatically speaking, with regard to communications initiated by Yahweh (or an agent),[201] our verb is used only in the depiction of two kinds of communication events:

- those whose content has *highly significant implications* for the future (Gen 12:7; 17:1; 26:24; 35:9; Exod 3:2; 1 Kgs 3:5; 9:2); or
- those *whose advent is unusual*—that is, involving considerable effort or exceptional means (Gen 18:1; Exod 3:2; Lev 9:4, 6, 23; Num 16:19–20 and similar interventions; Jud 6:11; 13:3).[202]

The hailing signal and the role of visual elements. Various visual elements (e.g., a "cloud" or "pillar") correlate with our verb's usage. They function to hail the recipient, signaling an *intent* to establish communication—much like the ring tone in a telephone call. They are used simply to get the intended recipient's attention. Similarly, when a *messenger* is involved in the communication, that intermediary serves as the attention-getting device. (Messengers are visible, while their principal is not.)

The advent stage of communication. Before any two parties can communicate, a pair of conditions must be met: the first party must *signal an intent* to communicate; and the second party must *notice* that the other party indeed intends to communicate something. That is to say, both parties are necessarily involved from the beginning. Communication is established—that is, an exchange of informational content is ready to commence—only when both parties have agreed to communicate.[203]

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194 In this excursus, the expression "our verb" means: Niphal ראה when applied to persons—whether human or divine.

195 This excursus summarizes the findings of a comprehensive, cognitively based assessment, as detailed in Stein, "Niphal ראה."

196 According to de Blois our verb denotes the "process whereby humans [or] deities . . . *become perceptible*, primarily—though not necessarily exclusively—to the eye" (SDBH, as lexical meaning [1][b]; emphasis added). Similarly Naudé, NIDOTTE, 3:1104; Culver, TWOT.

197 This widely held view is confirmed in Stein, "Niphal ראה," which finds that a visual-perception frame correlates with less than a third of our verb's usages.

198 Fuhs (TDOT 13:236) and Vetter (TLOT 3:1182–83).

199 The 60 instances include those cases in which the grammatical subject is כְּבוֹד יְיָ *kəvôd Yhwh* "Yahweh's glory." (That term denotes an entity that functions initially like a messenger: it appears visibly on Yahweh's behalf; and it garners human attention and establishes communication.) In the remaining 3 instances, the usages are too vague to classify.

200 Typically, the communication's *initiator* (the semantic agent) is designated by the verb's subject. The communication's intended *recipient* (the semantic patient) is designated by the object of an attendant prepositional phrase.

201 As a baseline, note that Yahweh is almost never depicted as simply starting to address someone new without an introductory frame. One exception is Abram (Gen 12:1). There, the violation of narrative convention seems to serve a dual purpose: implying an existing intimacy between the parties, and signaling a new dramatic development. The other two exceptions are Aaron (Exod 4:27) and Joshua (Josh 1:1), who seem to be treated as part of Moses' team in his role as Yahweh's agent.

202 The call of Moses (Exod 3:2) is listed in both categories because the Bible subsequently attaches immense importance to Moses's authority. Hence the narrator treats us to a detailed account of how Moses first gained that authority.

203 Even if the action denoted by our verb is a case that more literally involves vision, the added specification of a recipient logically requires that the latter *has noticed* that an "appearance" has occurred—and can *classify* (if not identify) the subject.

The scope of our verb's semantics. Our verb can variously denote either the initial hailing call, or the subsequent advent stage (akin to the "handshake" portion of a fax transmission), or the whole communication event (including the transfer of information). These denotations are logically distinct, yet they are cognitively associated with each other via a well-known communication script. The first stage leads to the second; and the second leads to the third. The fact that the hailing signal is attention-getting by design makes it *cognitively salient*—and thus a perfect emblem for also denoting the subsequent stages.

Our verb grammatically attributes its action to the subject (which in agency cases refers to the sender/principal). Consequently, we can safely assume that it originally indicated only the *initiation* of communication: the hailing signal. Eventually, by recourse to the communication script, our verb came to denote the advent stage; in such usages, it can be glossed in English as "make contact with." And eventually, by further extension, it was occasionally employed to stand for the whole communication event.

More than two-thirds of our verb's usages denote the *advent stage*. This denotation 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 usage by default conveys that *communication is established* between the parties in question.

Recognition of the sender's agent (and of the sender). Under what conditions would the recipient's 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 step. Recall 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.

When an agent functions as an intermediary. Our verb applies to a communication event's initiator regardless of whether that party ever "appears" in person to the message's recipient. For the communication might well take place *via an intermediary*—which precludes the recipient's seeing the initiator.

Indeed, our verb is *conventionally* applied to a principal whose agent serves as an intermediary. The most obvious case is 1 Sam 3:21 (*wayyōsef Yhwh ləhērāʾōh*), which equates our verb's usage with the deity's ongoing delivery of messages via an agent, Samuel (a "prophet," v. 20).[204] In addition, our verb is employed metonymically when adult males (Exod 34:23; Deut 16:16) are standing in for the whole Israelite populace (Exod 34:23–24; Deut 31:11). And a third line of evidence is the set of metonymic usages where an angel (Gen 22:11; Exod 3:2; 1 Chr 21:18) stands in for the deity (Gen 22:14; Exod 3:16; 2 Chr 3:1).[205]

Thus when the ancient audience encountered a clause that our verb governed, it was evidently normal for them to imagine that an agent might be involved. This finding undercuts the common scholarly claim that the manifestation of three very visible figures in Gen 18:2 confirms the meaning "appeared" (visibly) for our verb in the previous verse. In a plain-sense construal, agency was also an option.

204 This verse 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." In that episode, visual content was conspicuously absent from both the narrator's depiction and the characters' interest. (A Hiphil participle in v. 15 is a substantive reflex of our Niphal verb; it does not independently establish visual content.) Now at verse 21, the text's audience would reliably expect that what "continues" are further *mediated verbal communications* via a principal–agent relationship.

205 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 Stein, "Angels by Another Name."

Table 2. Niphal נראה *r-ʾ-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 עַיִן בְּעַיִן *ʿayin bə-ʿayin* 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.

Excursus 10: On the Noun אִישׁ as Denoting an Agent

The noun אִישׁ *ʾîš* (or its functional plural, אֲנָשִׁים *ʾănāšîm*) 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.[206] That is, in certain contexts, its meaning is roughly equivalent to the English noun "participant."[207]

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."[208] If so, it would be a good candidate for a distinct lexical sense.[209]

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).

To the extent that the word אִישׁ 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?*[210]

Why employ such a vague term? Scholars have countered that if "agent" were indeed meant by אִישׁ, the narrator could easily have used a more explicit agency term, such as מַלְאַךְ יְיָ *malʾak Yhwh*, as in other episodes—or even מַלְאָךְ *malʾāk* alone. As shown in the main portion of this article, such an objection is met by my finding that אִישׁ is Hebrew's *generic* term for an agent.[211] As such, it is the most linguistically efficient way to establish the key fact of representation (agency itself).

In order to establish conclusively that the "generic term" hypothesis is correct, it must be shown that אִישׁ meets the following criteria:

- Found across a wide range of agency situations.[212]
- Used consistently where the bare fact of representation is most salient, and where other alternatives would produce an over-specified (marked) expression.[213]
- Conversely, not used in agency situations in which more specific labels are more informative—whether the latter be unmarked or marked.[214]

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206 For discussion, see Stein, "The Noun אִישׁ"; idem, "The Hierarchy of Agent Labels"; Mangum et al., "Men: אִישׁ."

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

208 I am not the first modern scholar to propose that an agency sense exists (although I may be the first to explore its cognitive basis). In 1974, after observing that in the 14th-century-BCE Amarna letters, the Akkadian cognate to אִישׁ was employed as a designation in agency contexts, Alan Crown speculated that "it is most likely that the Biblical Hebrew word אִישׁ is . . . used on occasion with the sense of . . . agent for another" (Crown, "Alternative Meaning"). For a similar speculation, see Jirku, "Der 'Mann von Tob.'"

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

210 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.

211 See above in § 7, "The designation אֲנָשִׁים in light of cognitive linguistics." On generic-specific relations (also known as *hyponymy*) and on taxonomy as a subset of such relations, see Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 88–92, 109, 136–152.

212 Hall and Waxman, "Assumptions about Word Meaning."

213 Cruse, "Semantics of Lexical Specificity"; Downing, "On 'Basic Levels' and the Categorization of Objects." For an example of this diagnostic, see above, note 93.

214 Ibid. For an example of this diagnostic, see above, note 91.

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 "pragmatic import" or "discourse implicature."[215] Although semantic and pragmatic considerations actually exist on a continuum,[216] 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 more pregnant, 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 (desite admitting that words do not actually possess fixed senses in actual use). They look for clusters of similar usages that can be explained as having undergone a well-known, cognitively motivated type of meaning extension, such as metonymy.

In the case of אִישׁ, 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.

215 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.
216 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.