

however. In the poetic blessing of Joseph in Gen 48, Jacob refers to “the messenger who redeemed me from all evil” in one colon, and to *’ēlōhīm* in the parallel colon, which does not refer to the *mal’ak YHWH*. Similarly, in Josh 5:13–15, Joshua’s interlocutor is not described as a messenger, but as “the commander of YHWH’s host” (*šar-šəbā’-YHWH*). In Josh 6:2, YHWH is described as speaking to Joshua, but the continuity with 5:13–15 is not clear.² The situation in Zech 3 is unclear, in that the messenger of YHWH uses the formula, “thus says YHWH” (*kōh-’āmar YHWH*) in verse 7, which can be a messenger formula, but is also sometimes put into YHWH’s own mouth. Zechariah 4:1 refers to a messenger, independent of the divine name, but the compositional relationship with chapter 3 is unclear. This may be a later narrative that incorporates some of the features of the conflated narratives while also maintaining the distinction of the messenger and YHWH.

The passages that conflate the identities of YHWH and the messenger refer specifically to a *mal’ak YHWH*, “messenger of YHWH,” but in addition, they (1) alternatively refer to that messenger as YHWH or *’ēlōhīm*, (2) describe them self-identifying as YHWH or *’ēlōhīm*, and/or (3) attribute authority and power to them that was usually understood to be the sole prerogative of YHWH. Similar to the cult statues of surrounding societies, the messenger appears to be both identified as the deity and also distinguished from them. Sommer (2009, 40–44) treats these passages as one of the main prototypes of divine fluidity, but he combines these passages with others that do not incorporate the *mal’ak YHWH* formula, such as Hos 12:4–6 and Gen 32:24–30, producing a “messenger” theology that is broader than the phenomenon in question. His models of fragmentation and overlap result in the notion that “the selves of an angel and the God Yhwh could overlap or that a small-scale manifestation or fragment of Yhwh can be termed a *mal’akh*” (2009, 41). In other words, messengers may have existed as potential avatars with which YHWH may merge at any point, or alternatively, the term *mal’ak* may have served simply to designate any of the many different avatars of YHWH.

I would suggest that Sommer is on to something, but the story is a bit more complex than he describes, beginning from the specific and peculiar occurrence of the *mal’ak YHWH* formula. Exodus 3:2–6 is a representative example of this occurrence that can serve as a jumping-off point:

And the messenger of YHWH appeared [*wayyērā’ mal’ak YHWH*] to him in a flame of fire in the midst of the bush. And he saw, and—look!—the bush was on fire, but it was not burning up. And Moses said, “I’m going to turn aside and take

² Though even if this continuity is secondary, it would have had to have been accepted following the spread of this form of the text. That identification is accounted for with my framework of communicable divine agency, though my interrogation here is limited to the messenger of YHWH. For another approach, see Chambers 2019.