

The exclusively literary context of the origins of the composite “messenger of YHWH” merits further discussion. Because it operated within a literary medium under the control of authorities, the messenger could presence not just the deity’s agency, but the deity’s own self in a way that could not be privately reproduced and was not subject to the violence to which the temple and its accoutrements could be. The agent’s animate and anthropomorphic representation in that literary medium blurred the traditional boundaries that could be reified between the deity and its presencing media. The messenger was not a cultic object or a cultic installation whose theft or destruction the authorities found themselves having to rationalize, nor was the goal to discourage the followers of YHWH from worshipping an already accessible material object, at least initially (see below). Rather, the interpolation of the messenger initially answered a reflective concern for theological propriety and was subordinated and initially confined to the text. It would take on a life of its own within the community’s broader discourse about divine presencing, but this marks a unique innovation born of text and its features, rather than of rationalizing and/or accommodating uncomfortable cultic practices. This may account for the literary survival of this specific medium for the presencing of the deity’s own self.

The veneration of divine messengers may have become an unintended consequence of the survival and expansion of this text-based medium for divine presencing. As the Jewish literary imagination expanded in the Greco-Roman period, writers began to explore in greater detail the hierarchical structure of the heavens, producing complex social structures for the residents of the heavens, even developing names and mediatory responsibilities for a variety of different divine messengers (Reed 2020, 65–81). In some cases, divine attributes that appear to be personified in the biblical texts become identified with these messengers, such as “Anger” (Ps 78:49), “Wrath” (Isa 66:15), “Qešeph” (Num 17:11), and even “Shem” (Isa 30:27). Texts like Ps 78:49 may have influenced the reading of attributes like these as divine messengers: “He sent against them his burning anger [*ḥārôn ’apô*], wrath [*‘ebrâ*], and indignation [*za’am*] and distress [*šārâ*—a company of messengers of evil [*mal’ākê rā’im*].” In the later literature in which these figures appear explicitly as messengers, a common modification to the biblical iterations was the addition of the theophoric element -’*ēl*, as in *Qašpi’ēl* from *Sepher Ha-Razim* 4:22 and 3 En. 1.3. Other names are carried through without alteration, such as *‘Āzā’zēl*, from Lev 16:8, 10, and 26, who appears as a messenger in several places in 1 Enoch and in the Apocalypse of Abraham (Olyan 1993, 109–11).

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Scholars have alternatively dated the so-called “appendix” to the Covenant Code (of which Exod 23:20–21 are the opening verses) to a pre-D setting and a late-D setting. For the former, see Baden 2012, 119; Wright 2016. For the latter, see Blum 1990, 377.