

ACCOUNTING FOR THE MESSENGER OF YHWH

Four general approaches to this phenomenon have gained some degree of currency among scholars (Heidt 1949, 69–101; van der Woude 1963–1964; Gieschen 1998, 53–57; von Heijne 2010, 114–20). The prevailing view, which has been called the “identity theory,” holds that the messenger is a hypostasis, avatar, or some manner of extension or manifestation of YHWH’s own self.³ A second theory, the “representation theory,” suggests the messenger is a separate and individualized entity who, as an authorized representative, may speak in the first person as their patron (López 2010; cf. Malone 2011). The third approach—for which I argue below—is the “interpolation theory,” which holds that the word *mal’āk* is a textual interpolation (Irvin 1978; Meier 1999a). A final approach is closely related to the first two, and contends that the authors have intentionally blurred the distinction between the two entities to create a tension and ambiguity that signals the unknowability and mysteriousness of the divine form (Newsom 1992, 250). This theory has yet to be given a short-hand designation in the scholarly literature, but I will refer to it as the “ambiguity theory.”

Among the most conspicuous indicators that the *mal’āk* is an interpolation is the fact that the messenger in the relevant passages acts in ways entirely inconsistent with the responsibilities of divine messengers within the broader Southwest Asian literary tradition. This was briefly addressed by Samuel Meier (1999b, 96–97) in his monograph, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, and more forcefully by Dorothy Irvin (1978, 93–104) in her book, *Mytharion*. While Michael Hundley (2016, 7–12) highlights this inconsistency in arguing for the “idiosyncratic” representation of the messenger in the biblical texts, I would argue the messenger’s activity is not so idiosyncratic—it matches the responsibilities of the deities themselves as represented elsewhere in ancient Southwest Asian literature. Even within the biblical context itself, the messenger seems to take on features and roles exclusively possessed in the relevant literature by full-fledged deities.

Note, for instance, that the fearful reactions to the messenger in several places reflect Exod 33:20’s warning regarding the deadliness of seeing the deity’s own face:

Exodus 3:2a, 6

And the messenger of YHWH appeared to him in a flame of fire in the midst of the bush.... And he said, “I am the deity of your father, the deity of

³ Heidt 1949, 95–100; van der Woude 1963/1964, 6–13; Olyan 1993, 89–91; Friedman 1995, 13; Carrell 1997, 27–28; Gieschen 1998, 67–69; White 1999; Kugel 2003, 18–20; Tuschling 2007, 99–101; Eynikel 2007, 109–23; Sommer 2009, 40–44.