

GOD THE ILLEIST: THIRD-PERSON SELF-REFERENCES AND TRINITARIAN HINTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Elmo has become Public Enemy #1. Internet discussions over the last few years have started to blame the shrill red Muppet for teaching children how to refer to themselves in the third person. Just as Elmo can announce, “Elmo has a question,” so children around the world are declaiming of themselves, “Johnny hurt his finger.” Parental concern is so prevalent that the Sesame Workshop website even carries a response to it.

It transpires that Elmo is not to blame. Children have referred to themselves in the third person for generations—typically copying their parents’ own simplification of speech. But the topic has linguists once again talking about this phenomenon. Indeed, such third-person self-reference has undergone a resurgence in prominence in recent decades. Analysts recognize its widespread propagation through use by politicians (notably Richard Nixon and Bob Dole), by sports stars, and by prominent fictional characters (in influential literature/cinema such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, and famous television shows such as *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*). Such discussion is currently taking place under the formal label “illeism.”¹

This technical title is attributed to Coleridge in 1809.² The phenomenon itself can be found in written English centuries prior to that. The same syntax even occurs in the Greek of the NT and the Hebrew and Aramaic of the OT. Since the first generations of NT believers it has been employed as a significant tool for divining OT hints of the trinitarian plurality of God. It continues to be promulgated by contemporary evangelical systematians, particularly in the influential textbooks of the last hundred years.

Given the theological weight attributed by theologians to this syntactic phenomenon, coupled with renewed interest in it in the contemporary media, it is appropriate for us to critique how illeism has been used—and misused—in identifying the Trinity in OT texts. I propose that the various rhetorical uses identified by biblical and secular commentators offer a more responsible

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¹ As might be expected, such contemporary cultural commentary occurs particularly on the internet. The most comprehensive collation of culprits (albeit incomplete) and further analyses is offered at Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illeism).

² See, for example, James C. McKusick, “‘Living Words’: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Genesis of the ‘OED,’” *Modern Philology* 90 (1992) 1–45, esp. 32.

hermeneutic than do the revelatory claims made by many Christian apologists and theologians.

I. PROBLEM TEXTS AND THEIR INTERPRETERS

The texts scrutinized in this article are a subset of what we might generally call the “two Gods” texts of the OT. These can be difficult to organize systematically. For simplicity, we might recognize that the grammatical parameter of “person” helps us to identify and classify a number of related texts. There are places where Yahweh, speaking in the first person, refers to himself—or to someone else—as “Yahweh.” This is formal illeism, though further complicated by the presence of a number of divine titles. Then there are prayers where a psalmist or prophet switches from speaking *to* God in the second person to speaking *of* him in the third person. And there are yet further passages where two titles for God, either identical or distinct, are both narrated in the third person. From the outset we should admit that these categories are somewhat artificial and display a degree of overlap. We will briefly survey the latter two, before returning to formal illeism (*self*-reference).

The classic “two Gods” texts are those which conjoin two names, both in the third person. The prime example is Genesis 19:24, where the narrator reports that “Yahweh rained sulfur and fire . . . from Yahweh.” Exodus 34:5–7 recounts how Yahweh stood with Moses and “proclaimed the name Yahweh” (NRSV, ESV) or “called upon the name of Yahweh” (AV, RSV, NASB).³

A trinitarian interpretation of such texts can be traced at least as far back as Justin Martyr. His second-century “dialogue” with Trypho puts forward a number of Christological proofs from the OT which are all ultimately grounded upon Justin’s claims for Gen 19:24.⁴ Justin’s method clearly influenced ensuing Church Fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and

³ Christians would traditionally hasten to emulate the NT and add here the testimony of Ps 110:1. The introduction, “Yahweh says to my Lord [or Adonai],” gives the impression of distinguishing God by two different names, and the NT is certainly comfortable to retrospectively identify here the Father and Son. Note, however, that this trinitarian solution requires the clarity of NT revelation in order to identify the (new?) referent of אֲדֹנָי and to discover that this referent is as divine as Yahweh. It is also important to observe that the popularity of this psalm in the NT may well have been because, while it aggrandizes the royal/messianic figure and his reign, it does *not* overtly equate him with God. See the helpful comments of Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (rev. ed.; WBC 21; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) 118–20, citing the influential study of David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (SBLMS 18; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

A number of scholars would add to this list the more obscure Prov 30:3–4, which speaks of “the Holy One” and “His son” (NASB, NJKV, HCSB); see John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001) 451; and some of those cited below in n. 8. The passage is attractive because the language of “son” is more overtly trinitarian, and better distinguishes the two referents, than merely naming “God” and “God.”

⁴ Especially Justin, *Dial.* 56–62, recapitulated in 126–29. Seminal studies confirm that Gen 19:24 is “the pivotal testimony” on which Justin’s entire argument is based; for example, Oskar Skarsaune, *The Proof From Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition* (NovTSup 56; Leiden: Brill, 1987) 209, 410–12; Demetrius C. Trakatellis, *The Pre-existence of Christ in the Writings of Justin Martyr* (HDR 6; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976) 65.

Eusebius.⁵ Indeed, the trinitarian solution of such fathers was canonized by the Council of Sirmium in AD 357: *Pluit Deus filius a Deo patre*.

Little different are those passages where someone speaking to God in the second person can also refer to him in the third person. The best known of these is Ps 45:6–7 [MT 45:7–8], which speaks to “O God” about “God, your God,” and which is picked up as a Christological proof in Heb 1:8–9. To this we might add Psalm 92, which appears to open by speaking to one God about another (“It is good to give thanks to Yahweh, and to sing praises to your name, Elyon”), or Ps 91:9, which has these two interacting (“Because you, Yahweh my refuge, have made Elyon your dwelling,” MT; cf. LXX).⁶

This article is focused on those arresting texts which are formally illeistic—where God himself, speaking in the first person, appears to speak of “God” as if that were someone else. There are several texts regularly identified. Exodus 33:19 has Yahweh promise Moses, “I will proclaim the name of Yahweh before you” (AV, NASB, HCSB). In 2 Sam 7:11, Yahweh assures David that “Yahweh will make you a house.” Hosea 1:7 has Yahweh comforting the prophet that “I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by Yahweh their God.” And Mal 3:1 has long been interpreted as the prediction of Yahweh Sabaoth concerning his own arrival and the arrival of a judging and refining “Lord” (both preceded by another, probably human, messenger). To these can be added others, like Amos 4:11, where Yahweh affirms to Israel that “I overthrew some of you, as when Elohim overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.”

When such texts are collated, they are often seen as offering a cumulative demonstration of Yahweh (viz. the Father) hinting at—if not speaking explicitly of—the work of another God (viz. the Son). Martin Luther was a major supporter of the notion that one could not speak of oneself in the third person, drawing on a great many of these passages.⁷

⁵ Especially Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 5. Justin’s influence is established by Willis A. Shotwell, “Justin Martyr,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 589–93 (first and last comments), largely summarized from Shotwell’s substantial study, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr* (London: SPCK, 1965) 117.

⁶ These latter examples only raise trinitarian questions since we presume that the extra party, Elyon, also shares claim to Yahweh’s deity (e.g. Gen 14:22; Terence E. Fretheim, “אֵלֹהִים,” *NIDOTTE* 1.405–6). Prominent work on distinguishing Elyon includes Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992). Her conclusions typically rely upon grouping divine titles such that one god is known as El Elyon or El or Elohim, who is then the father of another god known as Yahweh or the Holy One. Her presupposition that these titles belong to distinguishable gods is as problematic as the presumption which raises the question in the first place: that both Yahweh and Elyon refer to the very same deity.

⁷ Luther, *On the Last Words of David* (1543), *LW* 15.335–36; cf. 279–80, 326–32; *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith* (1538), *LW* 34.226. Heinrich Bornkamm confirms “the approach Luther used countless times. . . . [F]or it was certainly one of his noblest methods of proving Christ as second person next to the Father on the basis of the repetition of God’s name” (*Luther and the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969] 103, 205). Indeed, Luther stretches his method to allow the presence of the full Trinity, presuming the Spirit to be responsible for the carriage of the divine words: “Wherever in Scripture you find God speaking about God, as if there were two persons, you may boldly assume that three Persons of the Godhead are there indicated” (*LW* 15.280; cf. 291).

We need not reflect long on Luther's impact on subsequent interpretation. Of most relevance is that the theologians influenced in the centuries following Justin and following Luther continue to influence modern systematicians. A survey shows just how many prominent conservative textbooks continue to promote these "two Gods" texts as demonstrating something of the OT plurality of God.⁸

We turn shortly to consider some possible solutions. Note already that there is substantial overlap between our various artificial categories. The promise and fulfillment apparent in Exodus 33–34 demonstrates that the same problem is experienced regardless of whether it is God or the narrator who repeats a divine name. That is, the "illeism" with which theologians are concerned is not strictly constrained to the third-person self-reference construction. Nor are these various texts usually distinguished into separate categories in the academic or popular literature. Rather, these various "two Gods" texts are traditionally presented as a single amorphous "proof." While these wider occurrences remain significant, this article scrutinizes only those which are formally illeistic (i.e. direct speech referring to oneself in third-person fashion).

It is also judicious to note that labeling such texts as "illeistic" already prejudges how we should interpret their syntax and referent(s). The label suggests, as I hope to show, that such texts can indeed be better understood as divine *self*-references, rather than as one God or divine Person referring to another.

II. SOLUTIONS FROM SYNTAX AND SCRIPTURE

1. *Introductory matters.* Before the biblical survey itself, there are a number of observations which will assist us. First, it is important to recognize that this article is not concerned to rehearse every attempt to discover hints of the Trinity in the OT. There are a number of other syntactic matters which are not treated here, such as the non-singular form of the divine name Elohim, or those texts where God refers to himself in plural terms (Gen 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8).⁹

Second, we should note that even the very concept of "illeism" can be applied in a fluid way. Coleridge coined the title for the repetition of self-reference using a third-person *pronoun* (Latin *ille*). Yet we have already seen

⁸ With varying degrees of detail and forcefulness: Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (8th ed.; London: Pickering & Inglis, 1907) 317–19; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed.; London: Banner of Truth, 1939) 86; Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 258; J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988–92) 1.85; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1994) 226–29; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2d ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) 207–9. The arguments are also raised in less influential publications, such as James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament: Old Testament Appearances of Christ in Human Form* (2d ed.; Fearn: Mentor, 1999) 60; and Roger Good, "Plurality yet Unity in God," *Affirmation & Critique* 11 (2006) 55.

⁹ The relevant data is compiled in many places, such as by those identified in the preceding note. Of these, Good's article is especially recent and exhaustive.

that both biblical and contemporary usage largely concerns self-reference using a *noun*: one's name or title. Already we are flirting with what one analyst has labeled "illeism with a difference."¹⁰

Third, we should recognize that all users of language make a vast number of assumptions about how language works. What we will see through this article is that, despite evangelical commitments to read Scripture in its own cultural and linguistic contexts, it is easy for interpreters in any age to make assumptions about what is acceptable or inadmissible.

Finally, just as interpreters make a variety of assumptions about languages, so there are also many motivations and agendas. These drive the various interpretations of the syntactic phenomenon. That the "two Gods" texts of Scripture hint at the plurality of God is an interpretation identified and promoted primarily by those (in any age) who might qualify for the label "evangelical": those who defend the unity of the two Testaments, and who search both OT and NT for what the one triune God has personally revealed of himself therein. Others who do not value these doctrines find alternative ways to understand illeistic references. This article presents a challenge for us to consider how doctrine drives interpretation. I myself am enthusiastically committed to such evangelical doctrines, yet am reluctant to accept the lengths to which some of the linguistic data is pressed.

2. Illeism beyond the Bible. It should largely be self-evident that there is nothing theoretically problematic about the syntax involved. Of course one can speak about oneself in the third person, even if speakers both ancient and modern do not at first consider it to be permissible.

An intriguing bystander accompanies this debate at each of the eras noted above. In intertestamental times, Julius Caesar (100–44 BC) was notorious for his illeism, which is classically preserved in his third-person account of the *Gallic Wars*.¹¹ At the time of the Reformation, the trait was promulgated in a number of William Shakespeare's plays, and most prominently in his own drama of *Julius Caesar*. Indeed, amongst modern commentators, one of the most formal studies of the different purposes of illeism remains Viswanathan's analysis of Shakespeare and *Julius Caesar*.¹² What we resolve for the example of Caesar may well be relevant to how illeism has been perceived at various points in history.

It is not unimportant to concede that illeism stands out. That Caesar has remained notable for two millennia recognizes that the self-referential style is distinctive and is not the most common or expected way of referring to oneself. Yet at the same time neither the original narrative nor its ensuing

¹⁰ S. Viswanathan, "Illeism With a Difference' in Certain Middle Plays of Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20 (1969) 407–15; reprinted in Viswanathan's *Exploring Shakespeare* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005) 3–15.

¹¹ Even the flyleaf of the Loeb edition recognizes this distinctive style: Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War* (LCL 72; London: Heinemann, 1917).

¹² See n. 10 above. Note also that Caesar's style has been politely lampooned in a range of other formal and informal literature, such as the *Asterix* comics of the mid-twentieth century.

commentators shows illeism to be syntactically unacceptable or semantically ambiguous. We recognize that Caesar is speaking of himself. Being uncommon does not render it incorrect.

After considering some biblical examples which *fail* to attract trinitarian comment, we will return to consider some of the rhetorical reasons why illeism is employed in both religious and secular texts.

3. *Mundane biblical examples.* The acceptability and frequency of divine illeism is demonstrated by Scripture itself. Many examples are so innocuous that they are rarely recognized as abnormal. That these have not been singled out as trinitarian proofs invites us to question why others have been elevated to a special status. After the flood, God repeatedly and emphatically uses first-person language to declare that “I am establishing my covenant with you” (Gen 9:9, 11, 12–15). Yet the reader may not even notice the switch to third-person language when God concludes that “I will see it [the rainbow] and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature” (9:16). Even earlier in the same chapter, God’s direct speech contains a poetic third-person self-reference (9:6). Similarly, Yahweh can comfortably refer to “the house of Yahweh” (e.g. Isa 66:20; Jer 17:26; Hos 8:1), when the supposed rules of sensibility demand a personal pronoun.

Nor am I aware of anyone mining Num 32:11–12 as a trinitarian hint.¹³ There are clear parallels between the last clauses of each verse:

(None of the men who came up from Egypt . . .)	for they did not follow wholly after <i>me</i> ;
(except Caleb and Joshua . . .)	for they did follow wholly after <i>Yahweh</i> .

Everyone seems content to recognize and accept illeism here. The same is true for the recapitulation of Deut 1:36; Yahweh’s first-person speech commends Caleb: “I will give him the land . . . because he followed wholly after *Yahweh*.”

A number of profane examples can also be marshaled to confirm that Biblical speakers can—and do—speak of themselves by name. With the common curse formula, both Jonathan and Abner bind themselves by name rather than the more usual “may God do thus to *me*” (1 Sam 20:13; 2 Sam 3:9). And Lamech titles his wives “wives of Lamech” as he addresses them (Gen 4:23).¹⁴

¹³ This example is identified by Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (AB 24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 170. It occurs in their defense of the related phenomenon in Hos 1:7, which is addressed below.

¹⁴ To these examples we can probably add David cursing David in 1 Sam 25:22, though this requires LXX and Syr. against MT, as accepted by many modern translations and commentators. Commentators who consider the possibility that the MT has been emended uniformly recognize that such a change is brought about on theological grounds (because David is never cursed) rather than syntactic ones. It is also significant to note that the other illeistic constructions surveyed in this paragraph do *not* attract mention of emendation in *BHS*.

The latter Lamech example is, in fact, the response of Jewish rabbis to the Gen 19:24 argument of Christians like Justin, as detailed in *Sanh.* 38b (e.g. Eduard König, *Die Genesis* [Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1919] 515, n. 2; Dirk U. Rottzoll, *Rabbinischer Kommentar zum Buch Genesis* [SJ 14; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994] 285–86). The constituent rabbinic sources can be traced to the second century (Skarsaune, *Proof from Prophecy* 412–13). That is, the recognition of illeism has as old a pedigree as the evangelistic overzealousness which it counters.

Nor is this merely an OT occurrence. The same phenomenon of referring to oneself by third-person name rather than by first-person pronoun continues to be attested in the NT. Jesus' high-priestly prayer defines eternal life as knowing "the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). Perhaps most famous—and widely accepted—is the way Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of Man."¹⁵ Yet such self-references have never been used to *distinguish* Jesus from another "Jesus Christ" or from another "Son of Man." If anything, some scholars are happy to pursue a less-than-divine interpretation of the title by insisting that such a third-person phrase need be *only* an acceptable form of self-reference.

If we step for a moment beyond the confines of formal illeism, closer inspection demonstrates that alternation of "person" is itself quite a common feature, awkward though it can sound to modern readers.¹⁶ Various prayers and petitions, which might be expected to consist purely of first- and second-person syntax, often incorporate third-person references as well. Psalm 67 opens with a string of third-person terms ("May *God* be gracious to us and may *he* bless us and may *he* make *his* face shine upon us") before the ensuing purpose clause and the rest of the psalm return to the expected second person ("so that *your* way may be known . . . , *your* salvation . . ."). The opposite occurs in Psalm 56, where the prayer is addressed to God and promises to "trust in *you*" (56:3, 7–8, 12–13 [MT 56:4, 8–9, 13–14]), yet is interspersed with the refrain about trusting "in *God*" (e.g. 56:4, 9–11, 13 [56:5, 10–12, 14]). Similar alternation pervades Psalm 92, which we have already flagged for other reasons, and other psalms such as 23, 135, and 138. When Hannah rejoices over the birth of Samuel, three parallel lines address "Yahweh . . . you . . . our God" (1 Sam 2:2). In turn, this reminds us that monologues and dialogues use all sorts of ways to clarify the participants and their relationships. We do not bat an eyelid when Abigail's petition before David concerns "my lord" and "your servant"—which even leads her to refer to her interlocutor as "him(self)" and to "his heart" (1 Sam 25:24–31, often softened in translations). We do not notice when the speeches of the Tekoan woman and of Joab speak to King David of "the king" and "his throne" and "his servant" (2 Sam 14:9, 22). Neither do we flinch when Jesus' prayer opens "Father . . . glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you" (John 17:1).¹⁷

¹⁵ For example, note how the team of Bock, McKnight, and Stein rendered Luke 6:5 in the first edition of the NLT (1996): "I, the Son of Man, am master even of the Sabbath" (emphasis added).

¹⁶ The phenomenon is sometimes labeled *Personenwechsel* and even *Numeruswechsel*. The terms do not, however, always correspond exactly with discussions of alternation in "person" and "number." On such matters see, for example, the introduction and bibliography furnished by Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9* (2d ed.; WBC 6A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) xcix–ci.

¹⁷ Indeed, for the single noun "lord" (אֲדֹנָי) alone, Gordon Johnston lists 49 occurrences of the polite "my lord" used in place of a pronoun in 15 different kinds of relationship (*NIDOTTE* 1.259). English speakers might reflect that the converse phenomenon can also be valid: first-person pronouns can be used to refer to second- and third-person referents (e.g. "How are we today?"; see David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* [London: Guild, 1987] 93). For a more formal survey of all these phenomena, see Emanuel A. Schegloff, "Some Practices for Referring to Persons in Talk-in-Interactions: A Partial Sketch of a Systematics," in *Studies in Anaphora* (ed. Barbara Fox; TSL 33; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996) 442–49.

Scholars have further classified when such alternation is unremarkable and when it is out of character. But the point remains that it is far from inadmissible.¹⁸

Nor is such alternation found only in certain kinds of prayer or address. In addition to the forms already surveyed, the parallelism in the prophetic oracle of Isa 22:19 shows a similar phenomenon: “I will thrust you from your office, and from your station *he* will throw you down.” Translators either omit or emend the second pronoun, or concede that “[t]he shift in pronouns seems to be rather typical of prophetic speech.”¹⁹

These examples, in themselves, offer no reasons why we must resolve them by resorting to trinitarian plurality. There is nothing syntactically incorrect in speaking about oneself in the third-person, even though languages regularly make provision for first-person and reflexive forms. Neither is it semantically impossible to use a third-person noun or pronoun to refer to another in conversation. Of course this *is* how someone would refer to a third party, so it remains possible that God is speaking of another (triune) Person using a divine name. But, from the form alone, we cannot share Luther’s confidence in identifying texts “where one Person speaks of the other, indicating that there are more than one present.”²⁰

4. *The purpose(s) of illeism.* While such alternation may be purely for the sake of variation, there are many other reasons why illeism may be employed. It is useful to consider some of these before embarking on our survey of biblical texts. This will furnish us with a range of possible interpretations.

As traditional apologists have assumed, it is possible that third-person references are referring to a third person—another God. Yet this is obviously not always true, lest we find that the Bible attests multiple referents of “Lamech” and “Abner” and “Jesus Christ.” We *need* the notion of illeism, lest the apologetic argument prove too much.

Indeed, the few formal studies of illeism do demonstrate a range of reasons why the syntactic phenomenon may be employed. These largely serve a range of rhetorical purposes.²¹ Primarily, illeistic reference allows the speaker to present himself from an external perspective. This may be to develop or

¹⁸ See, for example, Allen on Psalm 138, who admits that “Oscillation in [second- and third-person] divine references is a standard feature of thanksgiving songs” (*Psalms 101–150* 312).

¹⁹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 416, n. 6. This is significant, given that most of our problem texts come from the prophets. Indeed, a recent article judges no need to prove its opening assertion that “in many cases a speaker can also switch from the first person to the third person. . . . What this easy switching between first and third person means, however, is that in prophetic texts one cannot automatically assume that the prophet is speaking when God is described in the third person” (Marjo C. A. Korpel, “Who Is Speaking in Jeremiah 4:19–22? The Contribution of Unit Delimitation to an Old Problem,” *VT* 59 [2009] 88–98).

²⁰ Luther, *Last Words of David*, LW 15.335–36.

²¹ See, for example, the analysis of Viswanathan, *Exploring Shakespeare* 5–9; and the work of Yale linguist Laurence R. Horn, “‘I love me some him’: The landscape of non-argument datives,” in *Empirical Issues in Formal Syntax and Semantics 7* (ed. Olivier Bonami and Patricia Cabredo Hoffer; Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 2008) 175–76 and references there.

display empathy with another's perspective, and/or even to create distance from himself (what Horn calls a "dissociative third person" reference). At least for Shakespearean characters' orations, the device serves "to make their utterances impersonal, distanced, and dignified, and also to underline their consciousness of their worth and grandeur," yielding a result which is "at once rhetorical and dramatic."²² In oral deliveries, illeism can serve to remind an audience of who is speaking. "It bears notice that when speakers use a 'third person reference form' to refer to self or addressed recipient (in place of 'I' or 'you'), they select such terms as display (or constitute) the current relevance with which the referent figures in the talk."²³

Precisely these sorts of rhetorical purposes can be found in Scripture. In his reluctant boast about his "visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Cor 12:1–10), Paul clearly seeks to distance himself from the person narrated. He is at pains not to claim the honor some would attribute to "such a man," and argues that his own apostleship is conversely attested by marks of weakness.²⁴ A similar phenomenon is found in Daniel 4, where it seems that Nebuchadnezzar moves away from his first-person narrative in order to assign his sinful self-magnification and its ensuing humiliation to some past "other" (esp. 4:28–33 [MT 4:25–30]).²⁵

Some other possibilities come to our attention when we consider one further biblical example:

5. 2 *Timothy* 1:18. A much-debated NT example has Paul pray "May the Lord grant that he [Onesiphorus] will find mercy from *the Lord* on that day." It is not strictly illeistic; it is the apostle who makes mention of two "lords." Nevertheless, the example offers several plausible reasons why the repetition occurs.

It is not impossible to allow two separate referents here, with "Lord" referring first to the Son and then to the Father.²⁶ Note, however, that confidence in this interpretation relies upon existing NT examples of the term being applied to both Persons of the Trinity, and to the fact that the Trinity has been unambiguously revealed by this point of salvation history. Without such precedents it would be less obvious that Paul speaks of two distinguishable lords. As a result, this NT example does not automatically sanction the same trinitarian treatment of repeated terms in the OT.

²² Viswanathan, *Exploring Shakespeare* 9. Note also the ANE example raised by Korpel, "Who Is Speaking?" 88–89.

²³ Schegloff, "Some Practices" 447.

²⁴ For example, Ralph P. Martin, 2 *Corinthians* (WBC 40; Waco: Word, 1986) 390–91. Paul Barnett speaks of "Various forms of 'arm's-length' self-reference" (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 562, n. 27), and Linda Belleville helpfully catalogues a wide range of opinions on why Paul may have used such a self-reference here (2 *Corinthians* [IVPNTC 8; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996] 301).

²⁵ The various suggestions made by scholars are succinctly surveyed by Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel* (AOTC 5; Leicester: Apollos, 2002) 103–4.

²⁶ For example, Strong, *Systematic Theology* 318; Gordon D. Fee, 1 and 2 *Timothy, Titus* (NIBC 13; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988) 238; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 496. This is also the interpretation of a few mss which explicitly substitute θεοῦ for κυρίου (the latter "Lord").

Indeed, other commentators are unconvinced that both occurrences of “Lord” cannot have the same referent in this verse. The most sensible suggestion is offered by Knight who notes that, if Paul is speaking of one God in general or one Person in particular (whether Father or Son), the alternative to repeating the noun (κύριος) would be to repeat the personal pronoun (αὐτός) which would only make the sentence more ambiguous. The repetition is awkward, but preserves accuracy.²⁷ Still others suggest that the repetition may be intentionally emphatic. And others suggest the repetition is an acceptable Hebraism—and even cite Gen 19:24 as an example of repeating a title with a single referent in view.²⁸

Another proposed option for the Onesiphorus example is that perhaps Paul has, albeit awkwardly, incorporated a formulaic statement (or two).²⁹ Although it is hard to verify for this example from 2 Timothy, such a solution readily makes sense of a number of the OT examples, to which we turn.

And so, as we consider the flagship OT texts along with some further examples, we are alert to a range of reasons why a name or title may be repeated in a text. It may be to signal another individual. But it may also be to furnish clarity, to avoid ambiguity, to invoke identity or the weight of office, to create or maintain a sense of distance, or even to bridge that distance. And on many occasions, I submit, it may simply be familiar or formulaic language which is preserved.

III. PROBLEM TEXTS AND SOME SOLUTIONS

As we turn to the primary OT texts, an accompanying question is why some of these have repeatedly been pressed into trinitarian service, while others remain unnoticed. To be sure, conceding the very possibility of illeism—which I think is unavoidable in the light of the many additional occurrences catalogued in this article—dilutes the forcefulness of apologists’ arguments. I suspect that there have simply always been a number of OT *testimonia* which have become and remained popular in Christian polemic. These texts ultimately gain their value, not from the potentially-trinitarian references they contain or even from any NT appropriation, but because they intersect with important biblical themes of messianic salvation. Let us observe:

1. *Amos 4:11*. Amos 4:11 is significant for the issue at hand. We find Yahweh speaking of himself in the first person, yet also of someone (else?) in the third person. The result is that we have *Yahweh* saying, “I overthrew

²⁷ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 385–86.

²⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1963) 170; cf. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles* 385. The argument, of course, can be used in the reverse order; thus König (*Genesis* 515) raises 2 Timothy as a (non-trinitarian) solution to the question of Genesis.

²⁹ Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* 170; I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 720. Jerome Quinn and William Wacker settle for an anacoluthon, which may tacitly add weight to the idea that Paul is working formulaically (*The First and Second Letters to Timothy* [ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 616–17).

some of you, as when Elohim overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.” Other examples where a verb is repeated with different subjects would sensibly lead us to conclude that more than one actor is being contrasted, as it is with Gideon’s refusal of kingship: “I will not rule over you, and *my son* will not rule over you; *Yahweh* will rule over you” (Judg 8:23).

Our first observation is that the Amos passage is not commonly exploited for trinitarian nuances. Scholars of all hues seem content to allow Yahweh to speak of himself as Elohim in the third person, rather than trying to identify Elohim as another God (even though some might attempt to do this with other passages).

Second, we might consider that this silence may be all the more significant given that Amos shares some close verbal connections with the contentious Genesis 19. Particularly prominent is the verb; “overthrow” (פָּהַךְ) is found repeatedly in Gen 19:21, 25, 29. If two Yahwehs is a serious contender to explain Genesis 19, then scholars have been remiss not to repeat the possibility for Amos 4.

Third, the usual explanation of the illeism in Amos 4:11 is that the phrase “as Elohim overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah” is effectively a liturgical or proverbial formula. The verb (פָּהַךְ) is regularly associated with the downfall of those two infamous cities (Deut 29:23 [MT 29:22]; Jer 20:16; 49:18; Lam 4:6). Indeed the full phrase, “as Elohim overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,” occurs verbatim in Isa 13:19 and Jer 50:40. So Westermann is accurate to describe the formula as a “fixed expression.”³⁰

Thus Yahweh (or perhaps a redactor or scribe) speaks of his own past actions in a third-person way, without requiring that we distinguish between two Gods in the one sentence. Modern Bible translators certainly see no problem with this; the NIV simplifies the self-reference to “as *I* overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,” adding a footnote (cf. NLT, HCSB); the TNIV omits the explanatory footnote altogether (cf. CEV, NCV). Such simplification seems to have judged the referent correctly, though perhaps it attenuates some of the rhetorical force intended for Yahweh’s tirade against eighth-century Israel.

2. *Hosea 1:7*. Hosea 1:7 offers a similar syntactic example, with Yahweh promising “I will save them by Yahweh their God.” Theologians often mine this phrase for a trinitarian allusion.³¹ But, like the Amos example, few modern commentators pass comment at all on the use of a (proper) noun for

³⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 298; cf. Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 221: “the familiar expression”; Gary V. Smith, *Amos* (LBI; Grand Rapids: Regency, 1989) 146: “almost a proverbial tone.” The formulaic solution can be further strengthened on other grounds. Wolff observes that Elohim is not otherwise used in Amos as a title for God (222; cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* 298). And Shalom Paul suggests that Elohim be understood as a sort of superlative “which here, as in other passages, expresses not only the source of the catastrophe but also its incomparable enormity and immensity” (*Amos* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 149).

³¹ For example, Strong, *Systematic Theology* 318; Bavinck, *Doctrine of God* 258; Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 228, who sees this verse “once again suggesting that more than one person can be called ‘Lord’ (Heb. *Yahweh*) and ‘God’ (ʿ*Elōhīm*).”

self-reference; those that do typically excuse it as little more than a “rhetorical flourish.”³² Unlike Amos, we have here not just a different divine name but also bald repetition of the Tetragrammaton. Those who would see something stronger than mere self-reference suggest that this repetition is to add weight to the promise of deliverance; Yahweh is making an “emphatic promise of divine help.”³³ It may also be a didactic tool, as Yahweh and his prophet repetitiously and explicitly remind the people of their patron deity whom they have forsaken.³⁴

This point is borne out by closer inspection of the text. The purpose of the verse is to offer the people a clear contrast between salvation by (ב) military proficiency and by (י) Yahweh their God; would such contrast be as powerful, or even grammatically feasible, with a mere (first-person) pronoun? Moreover, to be “saved by Yahweh” (ישע ביהוה) is a recognized formulation, as found in Deut 33:29 and Isa 45:17. The detailed commentary of Andersen and Freedman appears correct:

The alleged awkwardness (Harper 1905:213) in the switch from first to third person vanishes once it is realized that it is not uncommon, when Yahweh is using the formal *Hofstil* [formal court or liturgical language] in an oracle, to refer to himself in the third person, and by the name Yahweh (cf. Hos 1:2 and Exod 6:3; Joüon 1947:404–405).³⁵

Indeed, if this grammatical feature of repetition is to be taken as a definitive way of *distinguishing* between different people or Gods, we would have to argue that the large majority of Hosea displays such trinitarian concerns. Emmerson’s study shows such duplication to be a common feature of the whole book.³⁶ Yet it is only 1:7—probably with its mention of salvation—which links neatly with NT Christology and, consequently, which has drawn attention. It would seem that Hilary of Poitiers has been overzealous in insisting that “Here God the Father gives the name of God, without any ambiguity, to the Son.”³⁷

3. 2 *Samuel* 7:11. This next example should be understood in a similar manner. It is true, though, that the text as it stands has caused consternation and emendation amongst commentators.³⁸

³² Francis Landy, *Hosea* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 26. Some also see this as evidence of poor integration of an often-alleged interpolation (see n. 47 below).

³³ Carl F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 1.44; Graham I. Davies, *Hosea* (NCB; London: Marshall Pickering, 1992) 57. Indeed, at this point Keil makes an explicit comparison with Gen 19:24.

³⁴ Leon J. Wood, “Hosea,” EBC 7.159–225, esp. 172.

³⁵ Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea* 195.

³⁶ Grace I. Emmerson, *Hosea: An Israelite Prophet in Judean Perspective* (JSOTSup 28; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 92. She later lists “e.g. 1:2; 2:22 [Eng. 2:20]; 3:1; 4:6, 10, 12; 5:4 etc.” (185, n. 155).

³⁷ *On the Trinity* 4.37, NPNF² 9.82.

³⁸ For example, many follow the LXX, reading ויהי (ἔσται, v12) in place of the repeated יהיה; so Henry Preserved Smith, *The Books of Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899) 301; P. Kyle McCarter Jr, *II Samuel* (AB 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 194; A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Dallas: Word, 1989) 112, n. 11d.

Those commentators who accept the text as it stands find nothing more than some potential emphasis—if the shift is mentioned at all. “Such a transition [from first to third person] is not uncommon in Hebrew; often no reason can be discerned for making the transition but here an emphasis in expression may have been intended.”³⁹ It highlights this “solemn declaration”—the climax and fulcrum of the whole oracle.⁴⁰ One of very few extended comments on the matter summarizes well: “The small sentence looks like a stereotyped formula which was handed down and has now been left, as it were, in quotation marks as being the most important part, which gives the main contents.”⁴¹

Moreover, we seem compelled to accept an answer like this anyway, when we consider the wider context of the promise. The words here are actually Yahweh’s instructions for what Nathan is to say to David (7:4–17). So when Yahweh tells Nathan to say “Thus says Yahweh” (7:5, 8), it is recognized both as formulaic and as a report of what Nathan is later to say *about* Yahweh. The remainder of the oracle is in the expected first-person form, except for the latter half of 7:11. Nathan’s mandate is thus recorded with several layers of quotation marks:

“Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: ‘Thus says Yahweh Sabaoth, “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be ruler over my people Israel; . . . and I will give you rest from all your enemies. And Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh will make you a house.”’” (2 Sam 7:8, 11)

The language then returns to first-person promises (“I will raise up your seed after you . . . , I will establish his kingdom . . . , I will be a father to him . . .”). Thus in 7:11 we not only have the latter occurrence of “Yahweh,” but an additional “Yahweh” to contend with. If repetition is to be taken as a divinely-intended indicator for distinguishing individuals then we have at least one Yahweh instructing Nathan to say that a second Yahweh is declaring to David that a third Yahweh will establish his dynasty. Yet readers’

³⁹ John Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971) 229–30; cf. Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1999) 74, n. 3; Mary J. Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NIBC 6; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 171; Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (SHBC; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) 452; Andrew Reid, *1 and 2 Samuel* (Sydney South: Aquila, 2008) 184–85. Note also the NIV’s fresh paragraph here.

⁴⁰ For example, Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles* (OTL; London: SCM, 1993) 333; William Johnstone, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (2 vols.; JSOTSup 253–254; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 1.1257. Japhet considers 2 Sam 7:11 a “special idiom.”

⁴¹ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (OTL; London: SCM, 1964) 286. There *may* be further evidence for this formula, using the same less common verb: “Yahweh making (וַיַּבְנֶה) a house,” particularly in Abigail’s acclaim (1 Sam 25:28; cf. Timo Veijola, *Die ewige Dynastie* [AASF B/193; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1975] 74; Heinz Kruse, “David’s Covenant,” *VT* 35 [1985] 152; 1 Kgs 2:24). But the point cannot be pressed because (1) the phrase does occur elsewhere, for example, of Solomon making a house (palace) for his Egyptian wife (1 Kgs 7:8) or of Jeroboam I making a house (shrine[s]) on the high places (1 Kgs 12:31); and (2) it could be fairly argued that such other occurrences are influenced by Nathan’s oracle. Others propose that such blurring between the perspectives of the various speakers (Yahweh, Nathan, narrator) is an acceptable literary technique; so Kenneth M. Craig Jr., “The Character(ization) of God in 2 Samuel 7:1–17,” *Sem* 63 (1993) 167–68.

sensibilities are never pressed to such an absurd extreme (despite the attractive *three*-fold use of the divine name). This indicates that even Christocentric readers are content to let the initial “Yahweh” in this verse overlap either with Yahweh the speaker of the whole oracle (as does 1 Chr 17:10) or with Yahweh the house-maker. That is, there is inherent recognition that illeism must be permitted somewhere in the verse. Thus it is entirely consistent for us to extend this to allow that all mentions of “Yahweh” in 7:11 are third-person *self*-references.

It is also possible that Nathan or some scribe has, accidentally or intentionally (for emphasis?), reverted to reporting Yahweh’s speech in the third person rather than the way it was initially uttered to Nathan (cf. Hertzberg). A mundane comparison can be found in 2 Sam 11:26, where “the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband had died.” The repetition and perspective in this report is so obvious that some major English translations do not bother to repeat the second occurrence of “Uriah” (e.g. NRSV, NIV).

Alternatively or additionally, the promise of Yahweh to David is so memorable or weighty that it has been preserved with the divine name intact. Compare the similar weighty promise through the prophet Isaiah, when Yahweh offers Hezekiah respite from a fatal illness and the threat of Assyria. Wrapped in a string of first-person promises, Yahweh affirms, “This is the sign to you *from Yahweh*, that *Yahweh* will do this thing that *he* has said” (Isa 38:7 = 2 Kgs 20:9). All the solutions suggested for Nathan’s oracle could be repeated for this oracle through Isaiah. So it is particularly telling that church history seems to have made nothing Christological of this similar construction.

The interpretation that there is only a single Yahweh speaking of himself in 2 Sam 7:11 is not only borne out by contemporary common sense, but was even recognized by those who first received Nathan’s oracle. David shortly responds in prayer. His paraphrase of the original promise shows his understanding of the illeism: “you, Yahweh Sabaoth, God of Israel, have made a revelation to your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house’” (2 Sam 7:27).

4. *Zechariah 1:17*. The same phenomenon in Zechariah is often pressed to yield a trinitarian (usually Christological) hint. An angel commands the prophet to attribute a number of first-person comments to Yahweh Sabaoth, culminating in 1:17 with “My cities will again overflow with goodness and Yahweh will again comfort Zion and he will again choose Jerusalem.” The two latter third-person verbs, with the explicit subject “Yahweh,” clearly grate with the first-person verbs and pronouns in the preceding verses.

These two verbs (בָּהֲרָ, נָהַם) are theologically significant, and studies are often made of them. They are sufficiently formal that Butterworth can readily note that “the verse has a liturgical feel to it.”⁴² This may be adequate to explain the use of a third-person formula here, resulting in illeism. Indeed,

⁴² Mike Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah* (JSOTSup 130; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 108. Important parallels are found, for example, in Ps 132:13; Isa 51:3; cf. 2 Chr 6:6.

the final phrase (יבחר עור בירושלם) occurs verbatim at 2:12 [MT 2:16], and similar constructions concerning Yahweh's election of Jerusalem are found at 3:2 and various other points in the OT.

Alternatively, as with the example of Nathan, we must ask whose perspective the text preserves at this point. After all, we are dealing with several layers of nested speech, and it is not unreasonable to question where the embedded quotation marks (as it were) start and stop. We might notice that modern English translations which employ punctuation choose to demote the repeated messenger formula ("Thus says Yahweh," 1:14, 16 [x2], 17) from being the speech of Yahweh himself to being the preface of the prophet, (e.g. NASB).⁴³ Perhaps the final line, whether at the behest of angel, prophet or scribe, has been recorded as indirect rather than direct speech.

Again, some choose to read here a record of one Yahweh speaking of another Yahweh. This, I submit, is influenced as much by the language of salvation and restoration, usually coupled with a Christological identification of one or more of the angels in Zechariah's opening visions. However, again, few contemporary commentators are persuaded. When similar alternation occurs in later visions (e.g. 2:8–12 [2:12–16]; 3:2), Merrill affirms that "such jarring interruptions of subject are not at all foreign to Hebrew syntax, especially when . . . there is a formulaic phrase."⁴⁴

5. *Malachi 3:1*. In attempts to conform Malachi's verse to its messianic application in the NT, scholars often insist that here Yahweh Sabaoth speaks of the coming of his designated Messiah, preceded by a probably-human messenger. In trying to squeeze both Father and Son into this OT verse, interpreters explicitly or implicitly deny the possibility that God might be speaking of himself in the third person. They are then free to claim that God must be speaking of another divine Person.⁴⁵

Careful scrutiny suggests that the best sense is made of the passage, in both its original OT context and NT appropriations, precisely if we do allow that God is speaking of himself, illeistically. That is, Yahweh Sabaoth announces that he himself, "the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple." Indeed, the clearly parallel line then further describes Yahweh in third-person fashion: "the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight—behold, he is coming." Again, it can be shown that this takes each of the identities in the verse in a way which is most consistent with their usage elsewhere in the OT.⁴⁶

⁴³ The NIV/TNIV removes a layer of punctuation. This may give the impression that the introductory formulae are the clarification of the angel to the prophet, but the Hebrew makes explicit (with the participles, "saying") that these formulae are part of the prophet's message to the people.

⁴⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 128.

⁴⁵ This seems to be the thrust of Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 454: "The terms of the verse clearly distinguish the Lord from the coming messenger of the covenant."

⁴⁶ For a survey of approaches to the verse, along with textual analysis of the identities, see my study, "Is the Messiah Announced in Malachi 3:1?" *TynBul* 57 (2006) 215–28. It is there that the possibility of God (and others) making third-person self-references is raised in embryonic form.

IV. ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS AND ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

While each of the examples surveyed has recognized some sort of formulaic phrase, we have seen that other refinements are possible. The common excuse which is often granted is that these apparent occurrences of illeism indicate poor integration of source materials.⁴⁷ This observation is quite significant. Such claims tend to be made by those with a less conservative approach to the authoring of Scripture. As such, they tend not to be so dogmatic about finding hints of trinitarian plurality in OT passages. Instead, they are comfortable with the possibility that individuals might refer to themselves in the third person. Even if they are uncomfortable with the alternation in person, they accept that the intention of the authors or redactors was to use a number of descriptors for a single referent. Such scholars recognize intentional or accidental illeism.

Such a candid approach also invites scholars (of all confessional stances) to ask precisely how, if at all, such grammatical features should be prescribed. For that is what we ultimately find in discussion of the “two Gods” texts: various individuals’ opinions about whether it is acceptable or unacceptable to repeat a noun or substitute a particular pronoun. Whose sensibility dictates whether Lamech should speak of “wives of Lamech” or “my wives”? Are we using ancient or modern criteria when we determine that a third-person reference must refer to someone other than the speaker?

Indeed, we find that such approaches are quite subjective. We have seen Hos 1:7 singled out for special treatment, because Yahweh promises to deliver Judah “by Yahweh their God.” Similar repetition of proper noun rather than pronoun a few verses earlier occasionally also raises eyebrows; Yahweh’s first words through the prophet instruct him to take a wife of adultery, “for the land commits adultery in forsaking Yahweh” (1:2). Yet Andersen and Freedman again deny anything extraordinary here: “It is not uncommon in exalted address to speak about oneself in the third person.”⁴⁸ Whose interpretation, the commentators’ or the apologists’, more accurately captures the intention of God and his prophet?

We could raise many other examples of this use of repetition which, in certain passages, makes some uncomfortable and/or eager to find a trini-

⁴⁷ For example, on Hos 1:7, see William R. Harper, *Amos and Hosea* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1905) 213; on 2 Sam 7:11, Anderson, *2 Samuel* 121; Gwilym H. Jones, *The Nathan Narratives* (JSOTSup 80; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 81–82; on Zech 1:17, David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 159; on Mal 3:1, Bruce V. Malchow, “The Messenger of the Covenant in Mal 3:1,” *JBL* 103 (1984) 253, Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (NCB; London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) 176; David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 209 (and many listed therein). Alternation between larger blocks of first- and third-person narratives is also hotly debated with respect to the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah; see, for example, H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 145–48 (cf. 89–91), engaging in some detail with Sigmund Mowinckel, “‘Ich’ und ‘Er’ in der Ezrageschichte,” in *Verbannung und Heimkehr* (ed. A. Kuschke; Tübingen: Mohr, 1961) 211–33.

⁴⁸ Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea* 170.

tarian solution. In raising these examples, we start to realize just how common biblical illeism is. Several have already been noted above. Even more helpful are a number of further examples of such repetition which typically fail to attract comment. We have already seen God's comments about God in Genesis 9:16 and his own repeated references to "the house of Yahweh." The phrase "followed wholly after Yahweh" is common enough to explain the illeistic uses in Num 32:12 and Deut 1:36, whether we see it as a common formula and/or as a rhetorical device for identifying the appropriate deity to pursue wholeheartedly.⁴⁹

Further helpful illustrations are offered in 2 Kgs 9:6–7, where the use of third-person formulas is quite transparent. Elisha's agent anoints Jehu with the words, "Thus says Yahweh the God of Israel, 'I have anointed you to be king over the people of Yahweh, over Israel.'" That is, the familiar formula, "the people of Yahweh," can be used even when Yahweh himself is responsible for the utterance. Moreover, Yahweh then proceeds to compare (or even equate) "the blood of *my* servants, the prophets" with "the blood of all the servants *of Yahweh*." Such formulaic phrases rarely attract comment concerning grammar, let alone become proof texts of trinitarian plurality. As such, they become additional examples of the validity of illeistic self-reference.

We can multiply such examples exponentially. The title "City of David" is regularly used even when "David" is named elsewhere in the verse (esp. 2 Sam 6:10; 1 Kgs 2:10). The Chronicler finds no problem in using this proper noun as part of a title, even though other pronouns are already employed: "he [David] built for himself houses in the City of David" (1 Chr 15:1).

A number of minor and major examples converge in David's prayer in response to Nathan's oracle. David's thanksgiving brings him to speak of both himself and God illeistically:

"Who am I, Yahweh Elohim, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far? . . . What more can *David* say to you for honoring your servant? . . . And who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth whom *God* went to redeem as a people for *himself*? . . . And now, Yahweh, confirm the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning *his* house. . . . For you, my God, have made a revelation to your servant that you will build for *him* a house" (1 Chr 17:16, 18, 21, 23, 25; cf. 2 Sam 7:18–27).

Japhet is one of the few commentators who passes comment on this phenomenon, and correctly captures the impact of the illeism(s): "Although David is the speaker, after the opening verse he refers to himself in the third person. . . . David throughout remains fully aware of his position as 'thy servant'; any reference to himself is dependent on his relationship with God, who alone is the focus of the prayer."⁵⁰ The use of illeism indicates and

⁴⁹ The full phrase, "follow wholly after Yahweh," recurs in Josh 14:8, 9, 14; 1 Kgs 11:6. It is, however, also possible to use pronouns instead of proper names, as already seen in Num 32:11 and also in the original verdict of Num 14:24.

⁵⁰ Japhet, *I & II Chronicles* 337.

preserves the distance that David expresses in the presence of God. Virtually every modern English translation allows such illeism to stand unchallenged and unexplained.⁵¹

As elsewhere, we would affirm that such constructions or formulae serve an important rhetorical (and thus pastoral) purpose. In Hos 2:20 [MT 2:22], God promises faithless Israel that “I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you will know *Yahweh*.” Even a relatively critical commentator like Macintosh recognizes the importance of this use: “It is significant that in a speech by *Yahweh*, Israel is to ‘know *Yahweh*’ (i.e. rather than ‘me’).”⁵²

The prevalence of covenant language and the centrality of the covenant itself may be an additional rhetorical reason for the many illeistic examples in Exodus. A small sample includes:

3:12: And he [God] said, “*I* will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is *I* who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship *God* on this mountain.”

9:5–6: *Yahweh* set a time, saying, “Tomorrow *Yahweh* will do this thing in the land.” And *Yahweh* did this thing on the next day.

24:1–2: Then he [*Yahweh*] said to Moses, “Come up to *Yahweh*—you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel—and worship at a distance. And *Moses* alone will come near *Yahweh*; but they shall not come near, and the people will not come up with *him*.”

As with David’s thanksgiving above, *both* *Yahweh* and *Moses* are treated at arm’s length in this final example.

The book of Jeremiah offers many further examples of *Yahweh* referring to himself as *Yahweh*. Moreover, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish when the narrator speaks about *Yahweh* (in the third person) and when direct speech is being recorded. This direct speech may be either *from* *Yahweh* (in the first person) or even *to* *Yahweh* (in the second person). Examples include:

6:27–30: “*I* have made you a tester and a refiner among *my* people so that you may know and test their ways. . . . They are called ‘rejected silver,’ for *Yahweh* has rejected them.”

11:17: “*Yahweh Sabaoth*, who planted you, has pronounced evil against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking *me* . . .”

11:18: “*Yahweh* made it known to me . . . *you* showed me”

12:14: “Thus says *Yahweh* concerning all *my* evil neighbours who are grasping the inheritance which *I* gave as an inheritance to *my* people Israel . . .”

⁵¹ There are sometimes emendations proposed and followed in 17:21, allowing “for yourself” in place of “for himself.” But the HCSB is somewhat unique in recasting the third-person language at the core of this verse to render it consistently in the second person.

⁵² A. A. Macintosh, *Hosea* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 85; cf. Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea* 283–84. Macintosh rightly recognizes the explicit contrast between “knowing *Yahweh*” and Israel’s then-present practice of naming him “my Baal,” even though other mss like the Vulgate attempt to correct or soften the illeism.

14:15: "Thus says *Yahweh* concerning the prophets who are prophesying in *my* name . . ."

In each of these examples, translations which capitalize divine pronouns capitalize these (e.g. NASB, NJKV, HCSB), accepting their divine referent. Such blurred boundaries recur in a number of settings, suggesting once more that we cannot be too hard and fast about insisting on "correct" first-, second- and third-person terms.

I have not explored here the possibility that any of these newer examples reflects an established formula. Yet even a superficial reading of the English presented here hints that many of these phrases from Exodus and Jeremiah and elsewhere could be common enough. They may represent many instances where the traditional or formulaic way of phrasing a thought overrides any tendency to normalize the grammatical feature of "person." They may, alternatively or additionally, have some other rhetorical/didactic value in each passage's purpose.

Once again we are reminded how subjective many syntactic claims can be. It is easy to assume that *Personenwechsel* must vary with a pattern of *our* choosing.⁵³ Yet ours is not the language or culture to which the various oracles were first revealed. Our criteria must involve the first hearers/readers (though without denying ongoing value for future generations and cultures). Note Stuart's comments on Hosea 11:

The passage is entirely divine speech, including, probably, v 10, which refers to *Yahweh* in the third person. God who refers metaphorically to himself as "pus" and "infection" (5:12) would hardly avoid comparing himself in first-person speech to a lion. Israel is referred to in the third person singular (vv 1, 4, 5, 6), the third person plural (vv 2–5, 7, 10, 11), and the second person singular (vv 8, 9). The variation of the persons and their pronouns is somewhat unpredictable, but by no means illogical or confusing. *To Hosea's audience it would have been accepted as typical.*⁵⁴

That is, 11:10 ("They will walk after *Yahweh*") ought to be accepted as another valid illeism. It is certainly not a verse invoked today to demonstrate the plurality of God. And even though Stuart's use of "probably" leaves a little room to negotiate, he still rightly identifies (1) the significant degree of grammatical variation within this chapter; and (2) its commonality in Hosea's day. Many other commentators noted above, particularly Andersen and Freedman, have also explicitly or tacitly recognized the acceptability of illeistic self-references.

⁵³ Note the cautionary tale of Lynell Marchese, "Pronouns and Full Nouns: a case of misrepresentation," *BT* 35 (1984) 234–35, who recounts how the selection and distribution of pronouns and proper names can have wildly different rhetorical impacts in various modern African languages. Other African "mismatching" of pronouns is documented by Deborah Galyan, "Speaking the 'Unspeakable,'" *Research & Creative Activity* 21/3 (1999) 10–15.

⁵⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 176, emphasis added. Compare Andersen and Freedman (*Hosea* 591), who see no change of speaker and who recognize the idiom "to walk after" always identifies a deity (although they do not explicate the significance of *Yahweh* naming himself in the phrase). They further insist, in chapters 2 and 5 (e.g. 381–82), that these kinds of alternation are "Hosea's characteristic procedures."

Nor have I offered a detailed study of the alternation readily found in many of the psalms. The psalmist frequently alternates between addressing God and recounting claims about him. Commentators are regularly unfazed by this, recognizing that “a shift from 3rd pers. to direct address occasionally occurs in Hebrew poetry (e.g., see 66:8–10; 93:1–2, 4–5; 94:12–14).”⁵⁵ The opposite is also seen, when the psalmist turns from his address to God to make a statement about God (2 Sam 22:29 ≈ Ps 18:28 [MT 18:29]).

V. CONCLUSION

It should be readily apparent that illeism—the use of third-person self-reference—is a valid and not uncommon form of both syntax and rhetoric. I am conscious that I have barely scratched the surface of the biblical examples which are available. Those outlined above come almost exclusively from the OT, for that is the Testament typically mined for trinitarian hints prior to the fuller revelation of the NT events and records.

There are a number of questions left open. In particular, I have not offered much insight into “two Gods” texts that are not formally illeistic. Nor have I surveyed the use that the NT itself has made of such “two Gods” texts. Both neglected areas converge prominently in the catena of Hebrews 1, which interprets trinitarian plurality in the Psalms it cites.⁵⁶ Nor does a recognition of the prevalence of illeism deny either the existence of the Trinity in the OT nor the possibility of direct or indirect revelations of it there. I am simply challenging whether this particular syntactic phenomenon can bear the weight which some continue to place upon it.

However, just as linguists are quick to defend Elmo’s illeistic speech, showing that it derives from existing and acceptable practice amongst adults, so I hope to have demonstrated that the illeistic texts of Scripture may well be open to responsible and evangelical interpretations *other* than those often promulgated by the early Church Fathers and contemporary systematic theologians. The final word might go to an early NT commentator on an OT passage. As he read the third-person language of Isaiah 53, the Ethiopian eunuch had the foresight to ask Philip, “Does the prophet say this . . . *about himself* or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34). May we, too, ask such a question before prejudging the answer.

⁵⁵ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990) 461, on Ps 92:1 [MT 92:2]; cf. Allen’s comments in n. 18 above.

⁵⁶ See, for example, the analysis and references of Stephen Motyer, “The Psalm Quotations of Hebrews 1: A Hermeneutic-Free Zone?” *TynBul* 50 (1999) 3–22.