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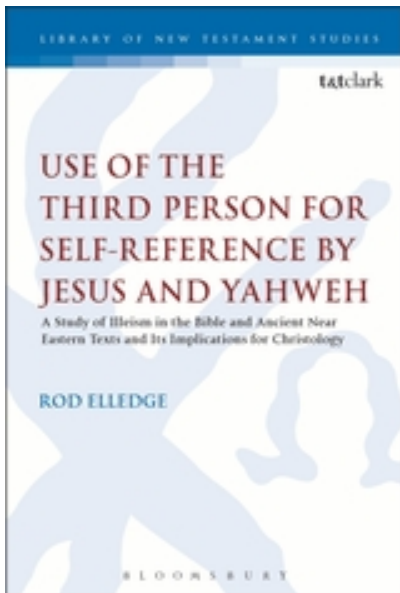
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Roderick Elledge

Use of the Third Person for Self-Reference by Jesus and Yahweh: A Study of Illeism in the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Its Implications for Christology

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Ancient Near Eastern texts contain many examples of direct speech of humans or deities who refer to themselves in the grammatical third-person, either using third-person verbal forms and third-person pronouns or denoting themselves with their distinctive names or epithets. This use of the third-person, which is known as illeism, is also widespread in the Bible. Good examples include, “YHWH said to Satan, ‘YHWH rebuke you, Satan!’” (Zech 3:2), and “Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man shall be delivered up’” (Matt 17:22). The phenomenon occurs only rarely in modern speech. This makes it confusing to present-day Bible readers, who may wonder whether speakers are referring to others instead of themselves.

Elledge’s book is based on his dissertation “The Illeism of Jesus and Yahweh” (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015). The differences with the dissertation are minimal and concern only some new references to scholarly studies (e.g., 115–16, 132, 144–47). The study is innovative because of its wide perspective. It compares the third-person self-references by God in the Old Testament with those by Jesus in the New Testament but includes also relevant evidence from other ancient Near Eastern and classical texts. One of the main goals is to establish the christological implications of the occurrence of illeism in Jesus’s direct speech in the gospels.

The introduction in chapter 1 describes the limited history of research into biblical illeism. The phenomenon was often ascribed to the carelessness of the author of the text, who apparently forgot that he was representing God, Jesus, or a human as speaking, to the secondary work of an editor, or to textual corruption. A classical but outdated Christian view held that God's speaking about himself in the third-person reflects the Trinity, with one divine person referring to another. Elledge largely limits his own research to illeism in direct speech and refers only briefly to other forms of illeism. This means that third-person self-references by narrators or authors, such as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in John 21:20–24, are left aside.

The brief chapter 2 shows examples of illeism in classical Greek and Roman literature. In their historical works, Thucydides, Xenophon, Julius Caesar, Flavius Josephus, and others describe their role in the events in the third-person, presumably to give the information a sense of detachment and objectivity. Elledge demonstrates that the use of illeism in the speeches of the god Zeus and the heroes Achilles and Hector in Homer's *Iliad* is more relevant to his goals, as it comes much closer to the ancient Near Eastern and biblical examples of illeism. Unfortunately, however, this classical evidence does not play any role in the rest of the book.

In the extensive chapter 3, Elledge distinguishes different forms of illeism in the Old Testament. The deferential use of self-references such as "your servant" (e.g., 1 Sam 17:32, 34, 36) expresses humility and distances the speaker from the superior (a human or God) who is addressed. In three occurrences of the oath formula "So may God do...", the speaker incorporates his own name to underscore his personal involvement and responsibility (1 Sam 20:13; 25:22; 2 Sam 3:9). Further, illeism occurs also in a summons to listen (e.g., Gen 4:23; 49:2) and other contexts. However, a vast majority of the examples occurs in the direct speech of kings and God. Kings refer to themselves by name but more often by the designation "the king" to emphasize royal authority (e.g., Esth 8:8).

To find irrefutable examples of divine illeism in prophetic texts, Elledge distinguishes two criteria: the use of the third-person must be accompanied by first-person pronouns relating to God, or the speech must be accompanied by a formula indicating that God is speaking. The numerous occurrences of the fixed expressions "to YHWH" and "before YHWH" in speeches of God are not analysed, but they serve consistently to emphasize the divine name. Other cases of illeism, such as "the spirit of God" (Exod 31:3), seem to be fixed expressions as well and are not discussed extensively either. Elledge does examine some of the remaining texts, with God referring to himself as "YHWH," "God," "YHWH your God," and so on. He suggests that the illeism of God functions in a manner similar to the illeism of kings, namely, to highlight the speaker's identity and authority.

Chapter 4 addresses interesting cases of illeism in nonbiblical texts from the ancient Near East, especially Ugaritic and other West Semitic compositions, and some Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Egyptian literature. Elledge argues that ancient Near Eastern gods and kings used illeism to emphasize their authoritative position from the perspective of the audience. He argues that illeism was common only among the primary gods. Further, he points out that the status of the kings in this nonbiblical literature was usually higher than the position of the Israelite and Judean kings in the biblical texts. Although this lies beyond the scope of his study, Elledge shows that ancient Near Eastern letters to superiors contain many instances of the deferential use of “your servant,” which is also widespread in the Old Testament.

Chapter 5 focusses on illeism in Jesus’s direct speech in the gospels. The only other third-person self-references in the New Testament occur in 1 Cor 3:5 (“What, then, is Apollos? What is Paul?”) and, probably, 2 Cor 12:2–5 (“I know a man...”). Among the self-references of Jesus, by far the most common one is “the Son of Man,” with “the Son,” “the Son of God,” “the Christ,” and “Jesus Christ” as less-frequent alternatives. Some more extensive self-references occur in the Gospel of John, as in “the One whom the Father has sent” and “He who comes down from heaven.” In some cases one evangelist records Jesus as using first-person pronouns while another, in the parallel passage, presents him as using third-person self-references (131–32 n. 54).

Elledge contests the theory that the third-person self-references in Jesus’s speech were inserted by the early church and prefers to approach them as an integral part of the transmitted text. He points out that Jesus’s use of illeism conveys ambiguity. A good example is John 9:35, where Jesus asks: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The addressee responds, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” However, Elledge rejects the idea that Jesus employed illeism in order to conceal his true nature, for fear of hostile authorities. This explanation is possible in only a few marginal cases. In general, Jesus’s use of first-person pronouns in the near context shows clearly that the third-person references relate to Jesus himself. Further, Jesus speaks illeistically also when he addresses his intimates and when there is no reason to fear.

According to Elledge, the fundamental reason why Jesus uses illeism is pedagogical: by presenting himself from an external perspective he can more adequately portray his unique authority and divine status. Although there are correspondences with the illeism of biblical and ancient Near Eastern kings, the high quantity of Jesus’s third-person self-references associates his illeism especially with the even more frequent illeism of God in the Old Testament. Elledge concludes that by extensive use of illeism Jesus characterizes himself as God rather than as king.

Chapter 6 summarizes the results of Elledge's research and sets out his conclusions. He acknowledges that in his own work several questions remain unanswered and that further research is necessary. As an example of what is still lacking, he mentions a more extensive analysis of illeism within each separate gospel (154). Further, he repeats his observations with regard to God's and Jesus's use of illeism in the Old and New Testaments:

Also, I highlighted significant overlap in the manner of use of the illeism of Jesus and Yahweh which sets their specific use of this phenomenon apart from kings and pagan gods. These shared characteristics include the prominent and consistent use of illeism, the consistent shifting between first and third persons, the multiple self-references used by each, and the instructional aspect reflected in both (Jesus to his disciples; Yahweh to Israel). Based on the summation of the research I suggested that this manner of speech may be yet another way Jesus presents himself "as God." (153–54)

This study represents a significant step forward in the research on biblical illeism. Its broad perspective, including the mutual comparison of biblical and nonbiblical data, appears to be fruitful. The surveys of older literature on the subject are illuminating and show which flaws underlay assumptions that have now become obsolete. In general, there are good reasons to value the author's own principle that shifts from the first- to the third-person and vice versa are due to rhetorical strategies and not to poor integration of materials from different sources. Sometimes, however, the approach is too synchronic and uncritical. For instance, the suggestion that Ps 72 is an illeistic psalm could have been rejected with more vigor, since the idea is based only on the ambiguous and undoubtedly secondary superscription.

The assumption of a close relationship between the illeism of God in the Old Testament and the illeism of Jesus in the New Testament is debatable. It is beyond doubt that in the Old Testament most third-person self-references appear in direct speech by God. However, since the Old Testament contains much more divine speech than royal speech, this does not come as a surprise. There is insufficient reason to argue that Jesus's use of illeism as such suggests that he wanted to be seen as God. Actually, Jesus's self-designations are quite different from God's self-references in the Old Testament. They have a more enigmatic character, and, as Elledge rightly notes, it is not always immediately clear that they relate to Jesus himself. Further, the self-references of Jesus show not only his close relationship with God but also that he—the "Son of Man," the "Son of God," and so on—is distinct from God himself.

Another point concerns the audience of God's and Jesus's speech. Elledge analyzes who, according to the texts, are God's and Jesus's addressees when they use illeism. It might be

a more promising approach to ask why the authors present God and Jesus as using illeism and to analyze which effect the illeism has, not on the audience within the text, but on the audience for which the text was written.

The use of illeism in the Ugaritic myths and legends is a case in point. As Elledge observes, the gods El, Baal, Athiratu, and Anat often denote themselves in the third-person, using their names or distinctive epithets. An additional example concerns Mot, the god of death, who refers to himself by his own name and epithets while he addresses Baal (KTU 1.5:i.7–8; COS 1.265). Interestingly, the direct speeches contain not only third-person self-references but also third-person references instead of second-person ones to denote the addressee. When in KTU 1.4:iv El addresses his wife Athiratu, he not only uses third-person self-references (“El,” etc.; iv.38–39), but first addresses Athiratu in the third-person: “Why is the Lady Athiratu of the Sea arriving, why is the Creatress of the gods coming?” (iv.31–32). In his message to Baal, Mot uses the third person not only for himself (1.5:i.7–8) but also for the addressee (“Baal,” “Haddu”; i.22–23). More speeches in which speakers denote themselves and the addressees by names and epithets occur in the Kirtu legend (“El,” “Kirtu,” etc.; 1.14:i.39–43; ii.23–27; cf. iii.20–21) and the Aqhat legend (“Anat,” “Aqhat,” etc.; 1.17:vi.18–19, 24–25, 33).

Apparently these Ugaritic texts often incorporate the names and epithets of the speakers and addressees into direct speech to remind the audience of the identity and peculiarities of the characters in the text. This frequent use of the third-person suggests that the real addressees of the speeches are not characters within the text but those who listen to the text’s performance. The use of illeism in God’s speech in the Old Testament and Jesus’s speech in the gospels can be explained along the same lines. The goal is to remind readers of the identity and characteristics of God and Jesus, not to represent precisely what God or Jesus is supposed to have said.

The book concludes with four useful appendices surveying the use of illeism by God, Jesus, and others in the Bible, although the lists of occurrences appear to contain a few inadequacies and inconsistencies. Further, it is not always clear why an apparent occurrence of illeism is not discussed. The book contains no reference to the illeism of David in 2 Sam 23:1 but does include a discussion of the illeism of Lamech, Jacob, and Balaam (Gen 4:23–24; 49:2; Num 24:3–4, 15–16). Unfortunately, there is no discussion of the question whether in Mark 5:19 Jesus uses *kyrios* illeistically, as Elledge suggests (123–24, appendix 3), or whether it refers to God, as many commentators assume.

Despite these shortcomings, the book deserves to be consulted by all those who are interested in the phenomenon of illeism in the Bible.