מפרשים

Classical Commentaries

RAMBAN

A vision could confirm, not command, a righteous deed

Genesis 18:1

Ramban reads the divine appearance as a true vision of the Shechinah (Divine Presence), granted to Avraham as a reward and sign of divine approval for having performed the mitzvah (commandment) of brit milah (circumcision), not as a vehicle for any new command—paralleling other cases where the righteous merit seeing angels or G-d's glory simply as confirmation that their deeds found favor; he also sharply rejects the Rambam's view (via Ibn Ezra's citation of the Moreh Nevuchim) that the whole episode, including the angels' eating and the Sodom narrative, was merely a prophetic dream, insisting instead that angels appearing as "men" reflects a real, if special, created glory perceptible to the pure of heart. Rashbam, by contrast, treats the appearance simply as the arrival of the three angel-messengers themselves (who are peshat-level called "Hashem" as G-d's agents, as elsewhere in Scripture), and explains "the heat of the day" not theologically but practically—it clarifies why Avraham offered only light refreshment rather than overnight lodging as Lot later did, since midday travelers would not be expected to need a place to sleep. AI SUMMARY

"The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot."

AND HE APPEARED TO HIM. — Rashi comments: "To visit the sick man. Said Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina, 'It was the third day after his circumcision, and the Holy One, blessed be He, came and inquired after him.' And, lo, three men: angels who came to him in the form of men. Three: one to announce to Sarah that she would bear a son, one to heal Abraham, and one to overthrow Sodom. Raphael who healed Abraham went from there to rescue Lot" for these do not constitute two commissions. This is because the second mission was in another place, and he was commanded thereon after [he had completed his first mission]. Perhaps it is because the two missions had rescue as their common goal. "And they did eat: they appeared to be eating."

In the book Moreh Nebuchim it is said that this portion of Scripture consists of a general statement followed by a detailed description. Thus Scripture first says that the Eternal appeared to Abraham in the form of prophetic visions, and then explains in what manner this vision took place, namely, that he [Abraham] lifted up his eyes in the vision, and lo, three men stood by him, and he said, if now I have found favor in thy eyes. This is the account of what he said in the prophetic vision to one of them, namely, their chief. Now if in the vision there appeared to Abraham only men partaking of food, how then does Scripture say, And the Eternal appeared to him, as G-d did not appear to him in vision or in thought?

Such is not found with respect to all the prophecies. And according to his words, Sarah did not knead cakes, nor did Abraham prepare a bullock, and also, Sarah did not laugh. It was all a

vision! If so, this dream came through a multitude of business, like dreams of falsehood, for what is the purpose of showing him all this!

Similarly did the author of the Moreh Nebuchim say in the case of the verse, And a man wrestled with him, that it was all a prophetic vision. But if this be the case, I do not know why Jacob limped on his thigh when he awoke! And why did Jacob say, For I have seen an angel face to face, and my life is preserved? The prophets did not fear that they might die on account of having experienced prophetic visions. Jacob, moreover, had already seen a greater and more distinguished vision than this since many times, in prophetic visions, he had also seen the Revered Divinity.

Now according to this author's opinion, he will find it necessary for the sake of consistency to say similarly in the affair of Lot that the angels did not come to his house, nor did he bake for them unleavened bread and they did eat. Rather, it was all a vision! But if Lot could ascend to the height of a prophetic vision, how did the wicked and sinful people of Sodom become prophets? Who told them that men had come into Lot's house?

And if all these [i.e., the actions of the inhabitants of Sodom], were part of prophetic visions, then it follows that the account related in the verses, And the angels hastened Lot, saying: Arise take thy wife. ...And he said, Escape for thy life... See, I have accepted thee, as well as the entire chapter is but a vision, and if so, Lot could have remained in Sodom! But the author of the Moreh Nebuchim thinks that the events took place of themselves, but the conversations relating to all matters were in a vision! But such words contradict Scripture. It is forbidden to listen to them, all the more to believe in them!

In truth, wherever Scripture mentions an angel being seen or heard speaking it is in a vision or in a dream for the human senses cannot perceive the angels. But these are not visions of prophecy since he who attains the vision of an angel or the hearing of his speech is not yet a prophet. For the matter is not as the Rabbi pronounced, i.e., that every prophet, Moses our teacher excepted, received his prophecy through the medium of an angel. The Sages have already said concerning Daniel: "They were greater than he for they were prophets and he was not a prophet."

His book, likewise, was not grouped together with the books of the prophets since his affair was with the angel Gabriel, even though he appeared to him and spoke with him when he was awake, as it is said in the vision concerning the second Temple: Yea, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel,etc. The vision concerning the ultimate redemption also occurred when Daniel was awake as he walked with his friends beside the Tigris River. Hagar the Egyptian is not included in the group of prophetesses. It is also clear that hers was not a case of the bath kol (prophetic echo), as the Rabbi would have it. Scripture, furthermore, sets apart the prophecy of Moses our teacher from that of the patriarchs, as it is said, And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by [the name of] G-d Almighty, this name being one of the sacred names for the Creator, and not a designation for an angel.

Our Rabbis also taught concerning the difference in the degree of prophecy between Moses and the other prophets, and they said: "What is the difference between Moses and all the prophets? The Rabbis say that all prophets saw through unclear vision. It is to this matter that Scripture refers in saying, And I have multiplied visions, and by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes. Moses saw through a clear vision. It is to this matter that Scripture refers in saying, And the similitudes of the Eternal doth he behold," as is explained in Vayikra Rabbah and other places.

But in no place did the Sages attribute the prophecy of the prophets to an angel. Do not expose yourself to argument by quoting the verse, I also am a prophet as thou art; and an angel spoke unto me by the word of the Eternal, saying, since its meaning is as follows: "I also am a prophet as thou art, and I know that the angel who spoke to me was by word of G-d, this being one of the degrees of prophecy, as the man of G-d said, For so was it charged me by the word of the Eternal, and he further said, For it was said to me by the word of the Eternal.

Our Rabbis have further stated in the matter of Balaam, who said, Now, therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back, [that is as if Balaam commented]: "I did not go [with the messengers of Balak] until the Holy One, blessed be He, told me, Rise up, go with them, and you [i.e., an angel], tell me that I should return. Such is His conduct!

Did He not tell Abraham to sacrifice his son, after which the angel of the Eternal called to Abraham, And he said, Lay not thy hand upon the lad. He is accustomed to saying something and to have an angel revoke it, etc." Thus the Sages were prompted to say that the prophecy comprising the first charge where G-d is mentioned is not like the second charge of which it is said that it was through an angel, only this was not unusual, for it is customary with the prophets that He would command by a prophecy and revoke the command through an angel since the prophet knew that the revocation was the word of G-d.

In the beginning of Vayikra Rabbah the Sages have said: "And He called to Moses, unlike Abraham. Concerning Abraham it is written, And the angel of the Eternal called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven. The angel called, and G-d spoke the word, but here with respect to Moses, the Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'It is I Who called, and it is I Who spoke the word.'" That is to say, Abraham did not attain prophecy until he prepared his soul first to perceive an angel, and from that degree he ascended to attain the word of prophecy, but Moses was prepared for prophecy at all times.

Thus the Sages were prompted to inform us everywhere that seeing an angel is not prophecy, and those who see angels and speak with them are not included among the prophets, as I have mentioned concerning Daniel. Rather, this is only a vision called "opening of eyes," as in the verse: And the Eternal opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Eternal; similarly: And Elisha prayed, and said, O Eternal, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. But where Scripture mentions the angels as men, as is the case in this portion, and the portion concerning Lot — likewise, And a man wrestled with him, And a certain man found him, in the opinion of our Rabbis — in all these cases there was a special glory created in the angels, called among those who know the mysteries of the Torah "a garment," perceptible to the human vision of such pure persons as the pious and the disciples of the prophets, and I cannot explain any further. And in those places in Scripture where you find the sight of G-d and the speech of an angel, or the sight of an angel and the speech of G-d, as is written concerning Moses at the outset of his prophecy, and in the words of Zechariah, I will yet disclose words of the living G-d in allusions.

Concerning on the matter of the verse, And they did eat, the Usages have said: "One course after the other disappeared." The matter of "disappearance" you will understand from the account about Manoah, if you will be worthy to attain it. Now here is the interpretation of this portion of Scripture. After it says that In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, Scripture says that G-d appeared to him while he was sick from the circumcision as he was sitting and cooling himself in his tent door on account of the heat of the day which weakened him. Scripture mentions this in order to inform us that Abraham had no intention for prophecy. He had neither fallen on his face nor prayed, yet this vision did come to him.

IN THE OAKS OF MAMRE. — This is to inform us of the place wherein he was circumcised. Now this revelation of the Shechinah (the Divine Presence) came to Abraham as a mark of distinction and honor, even as it is said in connection with the dedication of the Tabernacle, And they [Moses and Aaron] came out, and blessed the people, and the glory of the Eternal appeared unto all the people, as it was on account of their effort in fulfilling the commandment of building the Tabernacle that they merited seeing the Shechinah. Now the revelation of the Shechinah here and there was not at all for the purpose of charging them with some commandment or to impart some communication. Instead, it was a reward for the commandment which had already been performed, and it informed them that their deeds have G-d's approval, even as it says, As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.

Similarly, in connection with Jacob, Scripture says, And the angels of G-d met him, and yet we find no communication there, nor is any new matter conveyed. Instead, the verse only informs us that he merited seeing angels of the Supreme One, and thus he knew that his deeds had His approval. And so it was with Abraham: the seeing of the Shechinah (the Divine Presence) was both merit [for his having performed the commandment of circumcision] and assurance of G-d's approval.

Similarly did the Sages say of those who passed through the Red Sea and said, This is my G-d, and I will glorify Him: "A handmaid saw at the sea what Ezekiel the prophet never saw." This they merited at the time of the great miracle because they believed in the Eternal, and in Moses his servant.

At times the appearance of the Shechinah comes in a moment of anger, as mentioned in the verse: And the whole congregation bade stone them with stones, when the glory of the Eternal appeared in the tent of meeting unto all the children of Israel. That was for the protection of His righteous servants and their honor.

Now do not be concerned about the interruption of the portion since the subject is after all connected. It is for this reason that the verse says, And He appeared to him, and it does not say, "And the Eternal appeared to Abraham." But in this present chapter Scripture wishes to give an account of the honor that was bestowed upon him [Abraham] at the time he performed the circumcision, and it tells that the Shechinah appeared to him and sent him His angels to inform his wife [that she would give birth to a son], and also to save his relative Lot on his account. Abraham had already been informed by the Shechinah concerning the birth of a son, and Sarah was now informed by word of the angel who spoke with Abraham in order that Sarah should hear, even as it says, And Sarah heard.

This is the intent of the Sages' saying, "G-d came to visit the sick man," meaning that it was not for the purpose of some utterance but as a mark of honor to him. They have also said, "An altar of earth thou shalt make unto Me. Now if any person just built an altar to My name, he is assured that I will appear unto him and bless him. All the more is such assurance given to Abraham who circumcised himself for My name."

It is possible that the Sages may have further intended to say [by their remark, "He came to visit the sick man,"] that the vision of the Shechinah was a cure for his sickness on account of the circumcision, for so it should be, as it is written, In the light of the King's countenance is life.

RASHBAM, WHO READS IT DIFFERENTLY

וירא אליו ה — In what manner did G'd appear to Avraham here? Three men, who turned out to be angels came to him. There are numerous examples in Scripture where the angels or a single angel are described as "G'd", i.e. seeing they are G'd's agents they are described as ה', even though what is meant is an agent, an angel. To mention just one or two such examples: Exodus 23,21 כי שמי בקרבו, "because My Holy Name is within him." Or, Exodus 3 3,2 וירא אליו מלאך ה' בלבת אש מתוך הסנה, "an angel of Hashem appeared to him in the form of a flame of fire in the midst of the thorn bush." [the unusual fire which failed to consume, destroy, the thorn bush represented a Divine appearance. Ed.] Or, in verse 4 of the same chapter: וירא ה' כי סר לראות, "when G'd (i.e. the angel) saw that he had turned aside to watch the spectacle."

כחום היום — why would the Torah need to relate this apparently inconsequential piece of information (so that we read it aloud every week after over 3000 years)? The point the Torah wanted to make was that in the event that we compare Lot's reception of the angels, when he offered them lodging for the night, (Genesis 19,1) whereas Avraham only offered light refreshment, the reason for this is that the angels came to Lot in the evening, a time for travelers to find lodging, whereas here, seeing that they arrived during the midday heat, there was no reason to assume that they would not want to continue their journey.

