מפרשים

Classical Commentaries

SFORNO

Did Avraham see angels while awake or dreaming?

Genesis 18:2

Sforno understands Avraham's encounter as a waking event: the three men genuinely appeared before him, standing in evident readiness to address him, and their awe-inspiring bearing led him to run and bow as one would before emissaries of a king, interrupting his attention from G-d's revelation to attend to them. Radak, by contrast, reads the episode as occurring within a vision during sleep, in which Avraham saw himself rising and running toward these impressive figures; he further notes, citing Bereshit Rabbah, that Avraham's spiritual stature allowed him to perceive the visitors simply as human men, unlike Lot or Manoach's wife, whose lesser spiritual sensitivity caused them to recognize such visitors as malachim (angels). Both commentators thus explore the nature of Avraham's perception, differing on whether the scene was literal or visionary. AI SUMMARY

"Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground,"

וישא עיניו — he concentrated on seeing more clearly.

נצבים עלי — facing him. They appeared as if waiting to speak to him when he would be free to turn his attention from the marvelous manifestation he had just observed. People waiting to speak to someone are described as נצבים עליו, as for instance in Genesis 45,1 להתאפק לכל הנצבים עליו.

וירץ לקראתם — before they could open a dialogue with him.

מפתח האהל — he began running from the entrance of his tent. When a person is observed to perform any task with speed, with keenness, this reflects that he considers what he is about to do as important. We have another example of such conduct in Exodus 34,8 וימהר משה ויקוד ארצה וישתחו, "Moses hastened to bow down and to prostrate himself."

וישתחו ארצה — seeing that the appearance of these strangers was so awe-inspiring. We have a parallel verse in Judges 13,6 when Manoach's wife is described as reacting to the angel's awe-inspiring appearance as such that she did not even dare to enquire his name, etc. Avraham considered these men as emissaries from some king.

RADAK, WHO READS IT DIFFERENTLY

וישא את עיניו — the first thing Avraham saw after he had gone to sleep were three men standing next to him, נצבים עליו, apparently ready to be of service to him. The meaning of the expression נצבים עליו is similar to Samuel I 22,7 ויאמר שאול לעבדיו הנצבים עליו, "Saul said to the people standing next to him (in attendance) etc." The same expression is also used in this context in Ruth 2,6 הנצב על הקוצרים, "who was standing next to the reapers;" we also find this expression in Kings I 5,30 "משרי הנצבים, and in numerous other places in Scripture. These three men beheld by Avraham were standing at his disposal. They did not move, but indicated that they were expecting instructions from him. When he

realised this he ran toward them. This explains why the word וירא, "he saw" appears twice in this verse in close succession.

מפתח האהל — where he had been sitting. He saw himself running towards these men in his vision.

וישתחו ארצה — they appeared to him to be men of great stature. He then addressed them with the words reported in the Torah. Our sages (Bereshit Rabbah 50,2) say that Avraham was so familiar with the sight of angels that their sudden appearance did not cause him to become disoriented, frightened and he perceived them essentially as אנשים, men. On the other hand, Lot, whose spiritual powers were quite minor, perceived the men as being angels, מלאכים, seeing that he had had little experience with such phenomena. (compare 19,1) Manoach's wife had already told her husband that the face of the man who had told her that she would have a son was like that of an angel of G'd. (Judges 13,6)