

GUIDE 2:6

MAIMONIDES' DYNAMIC ANGELOLOGY

A new account of the way the world works.

“Belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy, and the belief in prophecy precedes the belief in Torah,” since “Even Moses our teacher received his first prophecy through an angel: *And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire.*” (Guide 3:45)

*ki hadea b'mtziot ha-malakhim kodemet l'dea b'navua, v'hadea b'navua kodem l'dea b'tora....
v'afilu moshe rabbeinu t'khila navuato b'malakh: v'yeira malakh ha-shem elav, b'labat esh.*

Overview

Angels appear regularly in the Bible and Midrash. Maimonides, in our chapter, Guide 2:6, drew attention to this tenet of Judaism. As we will learn in Guide 3:45, belief in angels precedes our belief in prophecy and Torah.

His angelology brought Aristotelian science to life. By Judaizing that science, he returned Aristotle's abstract principles to their living realities.

We should recall Aristotle's contributions to physics and biology. He recognized the dynamism in our universe, expressed in the Heraclitean principle that everything changes (*panta rhei*: 'everything flows'). Every substance is composed of *matter* which sustains its changes, and the *form* it manifests to us. Matter exists, but it exists in the world of concepts, for we never find it in nature apart from its form. Matter embodies the principle of *potentiality*. As potentiality it includes within it an emptiness, sometimes called *privation*, which always seeks a new form.

These abstract concepts are difficult to grasp. Maimonides remedied this by recasting them in his striking account of the parable of the “Married Harlot” (Proverbs 7:5-27). According to Maimonides “the entire book” of Proverbs is based on the analogy of the Married Harlot with *matter*. In that story, *form* stands for her husband or for the hapless young man, her prey. While her husband is away on business the wife peers out to “discern among the youths a young man void of understanding.” She meets him “in the attire of a harlot, subtle of heart.” She tells him, “Therefore came I forth to meet thee, diligently to seek thy face, and I have found thee.” His doom follows, “as an ox goeth to the slaughter.” Maimonides' comment is bracing:

“The outcome of all this is a warning against the pursuit of bodily pleasures and desires. Accordingly, he [Solomon] likens *matter*, which is the cause of all these bodily pleasures, to a harlot who is also a married woman....And we shall explain in various chapters of this Treatise his wisdom in likening matter to a married harlot.” (Pines trans, p. 13. See my chapter-essay to Guide 1:Introduction, “*Through the Lattice: The Parable of the Married Harlot*”).

The analogy is simple: Matter embraces form, her husband, but constantly pursues another form. Aristotle's endless cycle of matter adopting new forms seems meaningless. Maimonides, in our chapter, revealed the hand of God in the process. These forces are angels on a mission from God.

He does not stop there. These angels are the force of change. God uses them to carry messages and actualize potentials. They have a will to live and to fulfill their missions in the best way possible. They are *myriad* in number.

Aristotle also conceived of creative beings in his conceptual design, but not nearly so many. They are the “separate intellects,” *sikhlim ha-nivdalim*, i.e., *separate* from matter, that move the cosmic spheres producing the world’s dynamism. Aristotle identified them as the gods of Olympus.

Maimonides replied that the minds moving the cosmos were God’s *creations*, not gods. His innovation was to see that *all forces* are living messengers from God. All are angels. They express the intelligence and volition evident in every detail of the universe.

Science’s mathematization of our world revolutionized life, but this very abstraction hobbles it, from its uncertainty over *quanta* to its inability to plausibly explain the Cambrian eruption. Maimonides’ new living dynamism restores the role of metaphysics and religion to our understanding of the universe. (*Cambrian eruption*: Gelemer, “Giving up Darwin,” Claremont Review, Spring 2019).

THE PRIMARY MEANING OF ELOKIM IS A JUDGE WHO IS A RULER

Maimonides accepts that angels are the real governing powers of our world. They are its rulers. He began our chapter by showing that the biblical term *elokim* should be defined as *rulers*, and that those rulers are angels. The *elokim* first come to view as “judges.” He wrote:

“As for the existence of angels, there is no necessity to cite any proof from Scripture, where the fact is frequently mentioned. The term *Elokim* signifies ‘judges’; comp. ‘The cause of both parties shall come before the *judges*’ (*ha-elokim*; Exod. 22:8). It has been figuratively applied to angels, and to the Creator as being judge over the angels.”

This is surprising. We might have thought that the primary meaning of *Elokim* was God, since it is the third word in the Bible: *bereshit bara elokim*, *In the beginning God created*. Nonetheless:

“You already know that *Elokim* is a homonym (*m’shutaf*), for *God*, *angels*, and *judges–rulers of countries* (*uldayanim manhigei ha-medinot*). Onkelos properly translated it [into Aramaic] in the verse: ‘and ye shall be like *Elokim*’ (Gen. 3:5) in the latter sense, meaning: *and ye shall be like rulers* (כַּרְבָּיִן).” (Guide 1:2, my trans; *italics* supplied here and throughout. Onkelos: 35–120 CE.)

The primary meaning of *elokim* is not God, as we assumed from its first biblical use, but rulers. God is called *Elokim* because, as Creator, He is the *ruler* of the universe.

The reason that Onkelos translated *elokim* into Aramaic as rulers, כַּרְבָּיִן, was its use in Exodus 22:

“(6) If a man deliver unto his neighbour money or stuff to keep, and it be stolen out of the man’s house; if the thief be found, he shall pay double.

(7) If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall come near unto *God* [that is, to *elokim*: the judges], to see whether he have not put his hand unto his neighbour’s goods.

(8) For every matter of trespass, whether it be for ox, for ass, for sheep, for raiment, or for any manner of lost thing, whereof one saith: ‘This is it,’ the cause of both parties shall come before *God* [the judges]; he whom God [the judges] shall condemn shall pay double unto his neighbour.” (Maimonides’ quote-shards appear in grey-scale throughout this essay.)

Note the King James version makes the three mentions of *elokim* in lines 7 and 8 mean *God*, though the context specified judicial officers. R. Isaac Leeser (1806-1868) rendered it here as “judges” in the first Jewish English translation of the Bible, conforming to Rashi’s traditional reading. They are like the magistrates in the book of *Judges*, divinely appointed lawmakers who *ruled* the original Jewish villages in the Judean hills. (Cf. *Targum Jonathan* to Judges 2:16, where *shoftim* also becomes שֹׁפְטִים, *rulers*. Jastrow, *Dict.* 874)

Maimonides approved Onkelos’ translation, but nonetheless argued that *elokim* are not *human* rulers. He insisted that the term *must* refer to celestial rulers. According to Maimonides, Exodus 22 merely *extended* its meaning from celestial rulers to human arbiters!

To prove this completely nonobvious point he focused on the term *elokeikhem* in Deuteronomy 10:17: “For the Lord *your ruler*, *elokeikhem*, is God of rulers, and Lord of lords,” (my trans., *ki hashem elokeikhem—hu elokhei ha-elokim v’ad-nei ha-ad-nim*). Maimonides argues,

“This is the meaning of the verse, [that they are celestial rulers] and not that [they] belong to the human species; *for they are too lowly for that* (*ki hem pakhutim mizei*). This is so, particularly in view of the fact that the dictum, ‘your *Elokim*’ (*elokeikhem*), includes the whole human species, the rulers as well as the ruled.” (Pines trans.)

He meant that God and the celestial *elokim* are the lords of everyone, slaves no less than princes. Those human princes were only called “*elokim/rulers*” by metaphorically extending the term’s original meaning as the rulers of the heavens. The term is therefore homonymous, having a completely different meaning when used for cosmic rulers and earthly nabobs. Homonymy: *shem meshutaf*, Jud.Ar.: אסם משתף, and see Efros, *Philosophic Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*, 119-120)

Thus, we lexically portray the term (See my “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide,” in all Guide 1:1):

***Elokim* (Homonym)**

1. *Rulers*. This is its primary meaning, specifically the rulers of the cosmic spheres. The *elokim* are the separate intellects that govern the rotation and the emanations of the spheres, by which they rule all things in our universe. In a homonymous sense only, Exodus 22 extended the term to apply to merely human rulers, including judges.
2. *Angels*. The *elokim* as *angels* are those heavenly rulers. As Maimonides explains here, “There is only this difference in the names employed—[Aristotle] uses the term *Intelligences*, and we say instead *Angels*.” Also, the *elokim* and *inei elokim* are the names of angels of the seventh and eighth levels of Maimonides’ angelic hierarchy (Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei* 2:7).
3. *God*. We extend the term to God in the sense that He, as Creator, is the Ruler of all rulers.

The significance of his calling the term a *homonym*, as when he says, “Every Hebrew knows that the term *Elokim* is a homonym,” is to clarify that the three levels of meaning (human, angelic, and divine) are so different as to bear no comparison at all. Homonyms are words that sound alike but

share no meaning. Thus, a human ruler has nothing in common with angelic rulers, who themselves have nothing in common with God as Ruler. Maimonides reminds us that nothing we esteem in our merely human imaginations can be regarded as *elokim*, the cosmic rulers of all beings in our world:

“The nouns *elokim* and *ad-nim* in these phrases do not refer to human judges or masters, because these are in rank inferior to the heavenly bodies: much less do they refer to mankind in general, including masters and servants, or to objects of stone and wood worshipped by some as gods; for it is no honour or greatness to God to be superior to stone, wood, or a piece of metal. The phrases therefore admit of no other meaning than this: God is the judge over the *judges*; *i.e.*, over the *angels*, and is Lord over the *spheres*,”

Maimonides’ definition is close to that of R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) though R. Ibn Ezra makes *angels* the primary meaning, and *judges* only secondarily: “God is called *Elokim* by extension because His *actions* are executed via angels who do His will and who are referred to as *elokim*.” R. Ibn Ezra extended it from *angels* to human *judges*, only because “human beings are involved with God’s judgment.” He affirmed that they are *rulers* when he wrote succinctly “*elokim—melekh*,” *i.e.*, “*elokim means king*.” Like Maimonides, he emphasized the *active* sense of *elokim*, “This name is an adjective (*toar*) and not a noun (*etzem*),” in the sense that *elokim* live up to their name only by *ruling*.

Maimonides’ understanding was also reflected by R. Ovadia Sforno (1475-1550) in his commentary: “God is the Eternal God over all the eternalists that are separate from matter... and the Lord of lords – the Ruler of rulers, *Elokhei ha-Elokim*, which are the spheres and their movers.”

(R. Ibn Ezra to Gen.1:1 and to *Kuzari* 4:1. See R. Even-Shmuel, *ad loc*, v. III, pp. 110-111, note 2-4; Also, R. Kafih, notes 8-9.)

WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT ELOKIM AT ALL?

But why does a chapter devoted to angelology begin with a detailed analysis of *elokim* rather than the meaning of the term *angel*? In the original Judeo-Arabic text, after the first 21 words on angels as an authentic biblical concept, Maimonides devotes an astonishing 126 words to the definition of *elokim* before returning to the subject of angels.

Maimonides detoured into the meaning of *elokim* to correct Aristotle. They agreed that these rulers of the cosmos are incorporeal:

“We have already stated above (Guide 1:49) that the angels are incorporeal. This agrees with the opinion of Aristotle: there is only this difference in the names employed – he uses the term *intelligences*, and we say instead *angels*. His theory is that the intelligences are intermediate beings between the Prime Cause and existing things, and that they effect the motion of the spheres, on which motion the existence of all things depends. This is also the view we meet with in all parts of Scripture: every act of God is described as being performed by angels.”

The problem, however, was that Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, made these intelligences gods.

An Aristotelian could take the apparently plural structure of *elokim* to mean that many gods move the cosmos in the Torah. *Instead*, the *elokim* are the *many ruling powers*, which is the primary meaning, not that they are gods. They are creatures, not the Creator; angels, not gods.

(Gods: *Meta.*, 12:9:1074b1-15, my essay to Guide 2:3, and cf. *Kuzari* 4:1; *elokim* as other gods: Rashi and *Mechilta* to Ex. 20:3. In *elokim*, the "...im" suffix looks male plural, but, at least acc. to Gesenius *Hebrew Grammar* §124, is "plural-majestic.")

THE ANGELS ARE MESSENGERS

“‘Angel’ (*malakh*) means ‘messenger’; hence every one that is entrusted with a certain mission is an angel.”

The English term ‘angel’ comes from the same idea as the Hebrew *malakh*, as both are *messengers*, especially divine messengers. ‘Angel’ comes from the Greek *ángelos* / ἄγγελος (the ‘doubled gamma’ pronounced like ‘ng’ in *sing*). The Greek term is like *ángaros* / ἄγγαρος (*Wiktionary*: ‘Persian mounted courier’), and is close to the Hebrew-Aramaic *iggeret*, אִגְרָת, i.e., message, letter, or document (the *gimel* has a *dagesh*). The root of *iggeret* is נגנר/*carpenter*, but more at *joiner*, so, a *message* is where letters and words are *joined* together, a ‘carpentry’ of words. The classical Aramaic *angarta*/אנגרתא/ܐܢܓܪܬܐ has the same meaning. An angel or *malakh* carries a message. The Hebrew *malakh* is from a root *lakh*, *laah*, meaning to work, to weary oneself at labor, as with *malakha*, a type of work prohibited on Sabbath, hence, a *malakh* is a messenger whose mission is a type of work.

(On אנגרתא: *Wiktionary*; And see *Jastrow Dict.*: p.15. *Malakh, lakh, laah*: *Jastrow* 786, 686. Gen. 19:11.)

The mission of a messenger is the delivery of information. Many forces deliver messages. “Messenger RNA” delivers genetic messages. Similarly, nerves and silicon chips deliver electrical and electronic signals. Some *malakhim* are human messengers. Maimonides interprets Jacob’s messengers to Esau as human messengers, despite that one Midrashic opinion calls them *malakhim mamash*, actual angels. (Gen 32:4, *Ber. Rabba* 75:4).

Maimonides claims that all forces that deliver messages from God are incorporeal angels.

We first meet angels in the Guide as the *separate intellects* that move the celestial spheres. They are *noetic*, i.e., they are agents in the world of ideas, the world of Plato’s forms and Aristotle’s universals. As such they are *eternal*, and, therefore, more real than the *transient* things which “participate” in those forms. They explain the existence of those transient things.

The reason why God uses messengers is that His will cannot be realized through approach or contact. He never draws near a thing or touches it. In Guide 1:18 Maimonides explained:

“The... meaning of these words is ‘approach by means of knowledge’...Wherever a word denoting approach or contact is employed in the prophetic writings to describe a certain relation between the Almighty and any created being, it has to be understood in this latter sense [*viz.*, to “approach” *mentally*]. For, as will be proved in this treatise (Guide 2:4), the Supreme is incorporeal, and consequently *He does not approach or draw near a thing* (*v’lo hu ytalei nogea v’lo karev b’davar*), nor can aught approach or touch Him; for when a being is *without corporeality, it cannot occupy space* (*ki b’histalek ha-gashmut yistalek ha-makom*), and any idea of approach, contact, distance, conjunction, separation, touch, or proximity is inapplicable to such a being.” (The brackets are in Friedlander’s translation.)

Maimonides in 1:18 argued that there should be no “perplexity” (Kafih: *pikpuk*, Shwartz: *navokh*) over scriptural texts depicting the “approach” of God to things or people in our world, because

“Every such instance is of the mind, i.e., approach through thought, not through space” (My trans. of *sh’kol elu kirvat yedia, k’lomar hasaga m’dait, lo kirvat makom*). Space is occupied by *matter*, but God has nothing to do with matter. R. Even-Shmuel summarizes: “God never acts through proximity and contact, *derekh kreiva u’maga*, but rather through a messenger.”

You might ask, if the angels, like God, are incorporeal and do not occupy space, how can they act in our world? Philosophers call this the mind/body problem: How does our mind move our body? Maimonides does not try to solve this perennially troubling issue. Unlike Descartes, who tried to place the mind-body interaction in the pineal gland, Maimonides wisely avoided the problem.

He did, however, adhere to Platonic metaphysics, which recognized that noetic ideas and forms endure. Material things take part in those forms, the way chairs participate in the form of chair-ness. Additionally, medieval Neoplatonized Aristotelianism taught that the intellects governed the universe through *emanation*, pouring forth divine goodness upon the world.

Maimonides grasped those forms as angels, the divine agents acting in the world, just as Aristotle’s *separate intellects* and *universals* act in the world by actualizing potentialities.

I AND NO ANGEL

In our chapter, Maimonides says that in every case God acts through or with an angel: “For you never find an act done by God other than with an angel,” *l’fi sh’lo timtza klal peiula sh’yashena hashem ki im al ydei malakh*. But the Passover *Haggadah* says, famously:

“*And the Lord took us out (v’yotzienu) of Egypt (Deut. 26:8)—not through an angel, not through a seraph, nor through a messenger, but [directly by] God, as it says (Ex. 12:12): I will pass through (v’avarti) the Land of Egypt on that night and I will smite every firstborn....*
—I and no angel (*ani v’lo malakh*)...” (Passover *Haggadah*, *Magid*, First Fruits, trans. Sefaria.org)

Can Maimonides resolve the contradiction? Surprisingly, he does not try to do so, although there are serious problems with the *Haggadah* formulation. Why? As we will explain, Maimonides probably considered that the passage was inspired prophetic writing.

While most commentators accepted the “I and no angel” passage on its face, one notable exception was R. Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508). In his *Haggadah* commentary, *Zevakh Pesakh*, he wrote:

“On *Vayotzi’einu* (Deut. 26:8) – the *Haggadah* interprets: ‘*And the Lord took us out*’:– *not through an angel...* This is questionable because of a contradictory Torah verse which states, ‘*And when we cried unto the Lord, He heard our voice, and sent an angel to take us out of Egypt,*’ *v’yishlakh malakh v’yotzieinu m’mitzraim* (Num. 20:16).” (My trans.)

In other words, the *Haggadah* passage contradicts the words of the Torah, using the same term, *v’yotzienu*, “and took us out.” How can the *Haggadah* say that no angel *took us out of Egypt* if the Torah in Numbers 20:16 says that there was indeed an angel that *took us out*?

R. Abravanel, echoing Maimonides, explained that God did not personally take the Jews out because an entirely spiritual being does not act directly in the physical world. Since God is not subject to time, space, or motion, He acts through an “instrument,” a *kli*, i.e., an intermediary, like a *malakh*.

Anthropomorphism. The issue is anthropomorphism, which is the depiction of God in human terms. Xenophanes (c. 570—c. 478 B.C.E.) ridiculed anthropomorphism by observing that if a horse could draw, it would draw God as a horse.

How should we handle biblical texts that portray divine action anthropomorphically? Maimonides' answer was to teach us how to interpret the Torah's language for ourselves. We should strive to grasp the meaning of its inspired prophetic language using the Guide's lexical chapters, understanding that Torah was written that "in the language of men."

Maimonides wrote about anthropomorphism in Guide 1:47-48. He explained Onkelos' approach to the problem in his *Targum*, the ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah, where Onkelos replaced physical depictions of divine action with passive-voice distancing devices, as though those actions were performed "from before Him." He regularly substituted three intermediaries for God: the *shekhina*, "the glory" (*ykra*), or "the word" (*memra*).

Maimonides was not entirely happy with Onkelos' system, although he credited his goodwill. We do not rewrite the Torah because it can neither be surpassed nor superseded. It is only through the language of revelation that the divine expresses itself to us.

He wrote about Onkelos' method in Guide 1:48: "Whenever ... the term *to hear* is applied to God, Onkelos does not translate it literally, but *paraphrases* it, merely expressing that *a certain speech reached Him*, i.e., that God accepted it." Maimonides chose a different path. Maimonides asks us to *actively interpret* such apparently attributive passages for ourselves, relying on his definitions in the Guide. He taught that when the text says that God "hears" something, you should *understand* that God knows it or accepts it. The reason is that "No real [*i.e.*, eternal] attribute, implying an addition to His essence, can be applied to God" (Guide 1:47).

The point is that translation cannot reach the inexpressible, nor should we expect it to. It is better to be silent. In this vein he quotes Psalms, "Silence is praise to Thee" (65:2), and "Tremble, and sin not; commune with your heart upon your bed, but be silent. *Selah.*" (4:5).

Maimonides insisted that we pay special attention to the attributes of *knowledge*, *power* and, especially, *volition* when applied to God. They are homonymous terms, completely different in meaning for us and God, sharing nothing but the sound. He used a special formula, "God wills but *not* through Will," which means that God wills in a way that we cannot grasp, since His will equates to accomplished action. His will is nothing other than Himself.

(See my chapter-essay on 1:26, "the Torah speaks in the language of men," with Guide 1:47-48 "How to Rewrite the Torah," and 1:45, the chapter on *hearing*. The Torah cannot be altered: *Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 10:1:26, *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, Principle 9.)

The Art of Prophetic Writing. But this far literate writing cannot go. Language breaks down. It cannot communicate the incommunicable. R. Bakhya Ibn Pakuda wrote that if we were to eliminate all anthropomorphisms the Torah would be too abstract for anyone to understand. (R. Bakhya, c. 11th Cent., *Hovot ha-Levavot, Yikhud* 10, p. 112 in the Lev Tov Edition.)

That is why prophets depend on the art of prophetic writing. Their inspired words span the chasm between man and God. Their perfect revelation cannot be changed, only interpreted. That is probably why Maimonides did not alter the *Haggadah* passage in his own *Haggadah*, where the "I and no angel" is unchanged, and left undiscussed. However, in Guide 1:21, his lexical chapter on the term

avar, “to pass” or “to cross,” he explained the underlying passage, Exodus 12:12. Since God has no relation to *space*, He doesn’t “pass” from here to there:

“*Avar* figuratively means the Created Light (the *Or ha-Nivra*), and the *Shechinah*, both of which the prophets saw in their visions.... That is what this verb means in Ex. 12:12, “I *passed (avarti)* through the land of Egypt,” and in all similar phrases.... God, being incorporeal, cannot be said to move, and, consequently, *the verb ‘to pass’ cannot with propriety be applied to Him.*” (See my chapter-essay on Guide 1:21).

Thus, without mentioning the *Haggadah* passage, he simply explained that we should interpret that God’s *created light* or the *Shechinah* passed through Egypt to “smite all the firstborn” and to “bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt...” (Ex. 12:12, 12:51).

Why doesn’t the text just say that? Because prophets sometimes skipped the intermediaries. Maimonides spelled this out in Guide 2:48:

“The prophets sometimes *omit (nishmatim)* the intermediate causes, and ascribe the causes directly to God, saying God made it... This method is well known, and we, and others who seek the truth, have explained it this way; it is the belief of the members of our community.”

R. Abravanel in *Zevakh Pesakh* counts several such intermediaries, like the Will and the Wisdom of God, which are superior to the ten kinds of angels listed in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei* 2:7.

R. Abravanel writes: “Sometimes it is through the Divine will and wisdom that God acts.... God alone without any medium...through His knowledge and choice.” *I and no angel* means that I, God, willed it, but not through a “Will,” for it is unlike any volition we know of. R. Abravanel explained:

“When the sages state that the Holy One, *alone* in His glory, acted not through an angel, nor a fiery being, nor a messenger, they mean that God’s acts did not come about through some heavenly command, with angels or messengers sent by God. Rather, it means that through Divine providence and will, God performs acts beyond the natural order of things. This is what the *Haggadah* means when it says that ‘God alone (*b’atzmo*) in His glory (acted).’ But one should not assume that God’s acts were performed without some type of *instrument*...for the spiritual cannot act in the sensory world without the medium of instruments....[they] were carried out through God’s will, above nature and the actions of the celestials.... It is like the King who condemns criminals to death; sometimes he does so through judges or officers ...and sometimes the King does it himself...without an agent...but one should assume that the king has an *instrument* to carry out the deed, such as a sword or a weapon. It means that *through Divine providence and will, God performs acts beyond the natural order of things.* This is what the *Haggadah* means when it says that God alone in His glory (acted).”

(R. Abravanel, *Zevakh Pesakh, ad loc.*, trans. R. Mark Greenspan, 2019, *Sefaria.org*)

Maimonides’ son, R. Abraham adds, “When we say that God spoke to Moses without an intermediary, it means that although He spoke through a medium (*b’geshem nosei*), it does not possess its own spirit or intellect like an angel does (*aino bal nefesh v’lo geshem-sikhli k’malakh*).” (R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam, in *Commentary to Ex.19:19*, trans. By R. Y. Wincelberg, in *The Guide to Serving God*, 585, Feldheim, 2008.)

That is why Maimonides made no changes to the *Haggadah* text. These special miracles, so closely tied to God, could not be better explained than by this brilliant passage, a triumph of the art of prophetic expression. For Maimonides, its author could only be a prophet of the first order.

ANGELIC ACTION AT THE GRANULAR LEVEL: “All Forces are Angels”

We saw that angelic intermediaries achieve the divine will at the grandest world-historical level, like the Exodus from Egypt. They also play a role in the world’s creation and govern its minute details.

“Our Law does not deny that He, may He be exalted, governs that which exists here through the intermediation of the *angels*. Thus, there is the text of the Sages with reference to the dictum of the Torah: *Let us make man in our image* (Gen. 1:26) and its dictum: *Come, let us go down and there confound their language* (Gen. 11:7) which dicta are *in the plural*. They said: *The Holy One, blessed be He, as it were, does nothing without contemplating the host [pamalya] above* [see Shwartz trans., note 13 *ad loc*]. Marvel at their saying *contemplating*, for Plato uses literally the same expression, saying that God looks at the world of the intellects and in consequence that which exists overflows from Him (*Timaeus* 28a, 41). In certain other passages, they similarly make the absolute assertion: *The Holy One, blessed be He, does nothing without consulting the host [pamalya] above* (BT *Sanhedrin* 38b, JT *Sanhedrin* I). In *Bereshith Rabbah* and in *Midrash Qoheleth*, it is likewise said in reference to the dictum: *What they have already made* (Eccl. 2:12): *It is not said: He has made, asahu, but: they have made, asuhu. [That is,] He, as it were, and His tribunal have decided regarding each of your limbs and have put it in its position; for it is said: He hath made thee and established thee* (Deut. 32:6). In *Bereshith Rabbah* [51:3], they have likewise said: Wherever it is said: *And the Lord, (v’hashem), He and His tribunal* [are meant]. In these texts the intention is not, as thought by the ignorant, to assert that there is speech on the part of [God]... or deliberation or sight or consultation and recourse for help to the opinion of someone else. For how could the Creator seek help from that which He has created? Rather do all these texts state plainly that *all this — including the various parts* of that which exists and *even the creation of the limbs of animals* as they are — has been brought about through the intermediation of angels. For all forces are angels (*kol hakokhot malakhim*).”

Maimonides makes several points. The *Midrashim* noted that the plural language of Scripture revealed the angels’ role in divine action. But where he says, “These passages do not convey the idea that God ...*consulted*...other beings, as ignorant persons have believed,” Maimonides dismissed any thought that Scripture could justify heretical dualism, i.e., that God needs an eternal partner with Him in creation. Rather than the expression “consulted” he preferred the term “contemplated.” God contemplates the forms and they then come to exist. There is an immediate but noetic process.

Maimonides’ main point here, however, was that angels produced each and every part of the living organism and the universe: “*Each of the limbs* of man.... *all parts* of the Universe, *even the limbs of animals*.” He meant that all forces that move living beings are angels, including all the vital forces in animals, even the “details of the details.” Elemental forces are also the work of angels.

(“*Details of the details*,” *pratei hapratim* is R. Even-Shmuel’s formulation. *Animal forces*: *kokhot hakhionim*, even, per R. Kafih’s note 26, *kokhot habeheimim*, Jud.-Ar.: אלקי אלהייה. *Elements*: “The elements are also called angels,” *afilu hayisodot n’kraim gam hem malakhim*.)

The scope of angelic power is breathtaking:

“All *forms* are the result of the influence of the Active Intellect and the latter is the angel (*sh’kol hatzurot m’peulot hasekhel hapoel, hu hamalakh*), the *Prince of the World*, frequently mentioned by our Sages....Our Sages have already stated—for him who has understanding—

that all forces that reside in a body are angels, much more the forces that are active [lit., that are distributed –*kokhot hamitpashtim*] in the Universe.... The natural and psychical (*hativiim v'hanafshiim*) forces of an individual are called angels.”

Reading these passages, R. Even-Shmuel was moved to declare:

“Regarding this, that every physical force, such as the power of sight and the power of hearing, we call ‘angel,’ and, all the more so, the forces distributed throughout the world, such as light and heat, we call ‘angels,’ should be clear to anyone who truly understands the words of our rabbis in the Midrash.” (My trans of R. Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*)

I would go further. Though Maimonides had no microscope to probe the composition of things, nothing he said would bar his calling even the forces of DNA in our bodies “angels.” The only limitation is that the forces are never corporeal, though they actualize changes in the physical world.

It would be wrong to think that he merely reduced the angels to forces. Instead, Maimonides *raises* those forces to the angelic level, with the power and will to achieve the best outcome for each being.

In other words, Maimonides takes Aristotle’s abstract principles of dynamism, *i.e.*, the interaction of *matter, form, and privation*, and returns them to their living realities. Only by animating those dynamic forces does the design become known: the divine strategy of the free coordination of many messengers each charged to perform its task in the best possible way.

THE PARABLE OF THE JEW WHO WAS WISE IN HIS OWN EYES

Maimonides offered a parable to better explain his angelology of physical and biological forces. He realized that his doctrine might be misunderstood:

“How bad and injurious is the blindness of ignorance! Say to a person who is believed to belong to the wise men of Israel (*me ’utam ha-madamim sh’hem hakhmei yisrael*) that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the fetus, he will be satisfied with the account. He will believe it, and even find in it a description of the greatness of God’s might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire, and is as big as a third part of the Universe, yet he still considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power (*koakh mitzayer*) which produces and shapes the limbs, and that this power is called ‘angel,’ or that all forms are the result of the influence of the Active Intellect (*hasekhel hapoel*), and that the latter is the angel, the Prince of the World (*saru shel olam*), frequently mentioned by our Sages, and he will turn away; because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of creating forces (*hemtzat hakokhot*) that act in a body without being perceived by our senses. Our Sages have already stated—for him who has understanding—that all forces that reside in a body are angels, much more so the forces that are active in the Universe.”

This person “believed to belong to the wise men of Israel” was only wise in his own eyes. His ignorance is a kind of blindness that injures others. He is a sophomore, Gr.: *sophos moros*, *i.e.*, a sophisticated moron, σοφός (wise) μωρός (fool). In the words of Mortimer Adler, “There have always been literate ignoramuses, who have read too widely, and not well. The Greeks had a name

for such a mixture of learning and folly which might be applied to the bookish but poorly read of all ages. They are all sophomores.” (*How to Read a Book*. Simon and Schuster, 1972, p. 11.)

The thinking of this sophomore is shot through with corporealism. He endows divine forces with physical characteristics such as size and heat. He believes that angels have a physical body, occupy space, fly, and are ablaze. He accepts statements like “He [God] makes... His servants a fiery flame,” (Psalm 104:4), or “The angel is the third part of the universe,” never asking whether the fiery flame would consume the pregnant woman or how such a large body could enter her.

(Sources: *Bereshit Rabba* 68:12, “From where do we learn that the angel is the third part of the universe? As it says, *His body was like Tarshish, his face had the appearance of lightning*,” Dan. 10:6, where Rashi says that ‘*like Tarshish*’ means the size of the Mediterranean, *i.e.*, a third of the world. Also, BT *Chullin* 91b, and, alternatively, JT *Rosh Hashanah* 2:4:3. And see Guide 2:10, referred to below. “Wise men”: Maimonides’ *Treatise on Resurrection*, 1:4, where he argues that these wise men were rabbinic leaders, perhaps, the corporealists that Raavad, c. 1125–1198, alleged were “greater and better” than Maimonides, in *Hasagot* to Mishneh Torah, *Teshuva* 3:7. Thanks to Mr. Jonathan Sacks for this note.)

He feels that explanation detracts from a miracle. He insists that God can do anything (*kol zeh efshari b’yakhas l’hashem*), without considering whether it would be impudent to require that God perform impossibilities, or do miracles on demand. Impossibilities exist, *e.g.*, that God can neither square circles nor destroy Himself, make Himself physical or create a being greater than Himself (see chapter-essay on Guide 1:73, Proposition X). In Mishneh Torah, Maimonides explained:

“What is meant by the prophets’ statements that they saw an angel of fire or with wings? All these are prophetic visions and parables, as [Deut. 4:24] states: ‘God, your Lord, is consuming fire (*esh okhla*),’ though He is not fire and [this description of God] is only metaphoric (*ele mashal*). Similarly, [Psalms 104:4] states: ‘He makes His angels as winds’ [*i.e.*, winds are a metaphor for incorporeality].” MT, *Mada, Ysodei* 2:3.

Maimonides had already explained in Guide 1:30 why God was compared to a *consuming fire*: “That is, He *destroys* those who *rebel* against Him, as the fire destroys everything that comes within its reach.” And in 2:10 he explained how the angel could be “a third of the world”:

“All created things are divided into *three parts*: [the *first*] the separate intellects, which are the angels; the *second*, the bodies of the spheres; the *third*, first matter [hylic matter] — I mean the bodies subject to constant change, which are beneath the sphere.” (Pines trans.)

In other words, since there are three types of things in the world, and one is “angels,” any statement that an angel makes up a third of the world just means that the angel is one of the three types of things in the universe, not that it fills a third of all physical space.

Maimonides explains to this genius that the *force of conception* that fixes the shape of our limbs is incorporeal. When he tells him that our natural form comes from a formative force in the human seed that is actualized by an angel, called “the Prince of the World,” which is the *active intellect*, he flees (“...he will turn away”). Had he further said that this intellect is the tenth level of angels, the *ishim*, *i.e.*, our minds when they actualize potential knowledge, and that they emanate form and actualize it, he would run from Maimonides as far as his legs would carry him.

(*Ishim*: Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei haTorah* 2:7, “Therefore, they are called *ishim*, (“men”), because their level is close to the level of human knowledge.” *krova l’maala daat bnei adam*. *Aristotelian epigenesis*: the formative force in the male and female seed, *Gen. Animalium* 729b1 ff.)

It’s not that the wise fool thought that these ideas were heretical, but that he cannot recognize God’s true greatness as the Creator who spreads these vital forces through the universe. “He does not understand that God’s true greatness and power resides in His bringing into actual existence forces

that are potentially in things, which cannot be perceived by the senses.” (My trans: *mpnei sh'aino mevin inyan ha-atzma v'ha-yekholet ha-amitit hazo, v'hi hemtzat ha-kokhot ha-poolim b'dvar, asher aino nasig b'khush.*)

In abundant *Midrashim* the rabbis pronounced those formative forces angelic. In Maimonides' words, “Our Sages have already stated—for him who has understanding—that all forces that reside in a body are angels, how much more so the forces that are active in the Universe.”

That these “forces” are indeed intelligent and volitional angels rather than depersonalized physical principles was vividly emphasized by the rabbis in the Talmud: “When God said *after its kind* to the trees – the grasses *drew an inference* (*kal v'khomer*) with regard to themselves... Immediately, every species emerged *after its kind*...they do His will even when not explicitly instructed!” (*Hullin* 60a). These forces act purposively, not mechanically, with their own minds and wills.

You might laugh at this Jewish genius whose literalism blocks his grasping philosophical or scientific ideas (and Maimonides wants you to laugh at him). But let's try this another way. Suppose your modern smart Jew pedantically explains that our characteristics come from DNA. Is that really an explanation? A child would ask, “Why does the DNA do that? Where does it come from?”

Maimonides answered that there are life-giving forces in the universe. He recognized, beyond Aristotelian science, that the dynamic cycle of potentiality and actualization could not explain the creative urge existing in all things. There is a *telos*, a purpose, an *élan vital*, a conatus, a “drive,” indeed, a will to live in all things. By bringing abstract physical principles back to life, he captured that life better than the creed of lifeless forces in random collision, the Epicurean germ still lurking in the heart of both Aristotelian and modern science.

(For further reading, L. E. Goodman, “Maimonidean Naturalism,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, SUNY, 1992).

TWO KINDS OF ANGELS

Having shown that all forces are angels, Maimonides next explained how these forces are hierarchically organized. The hierarchy is based on the distinction between permanent angels and transient ones, all governed by the Designer at the top of the system.

The Midrash tells us that “no angel performs two missions,” for when their mission is done, they “go away,” i.e., they are *transient*. Having sung their song, they vanish.

“The theory that each force acts only in one particular way, is expressed in *Bereshit Rabba* (50:2) as follows: ‘One angel does not perform two things, and two angels do not perform one thing’; this is exactly the property of all forces. We may find a confirmation of the opinion that the *natural* and *psychical* forces of an individual are called angels in a statement of our Sages which is frequently quoted, and occurs originally in *Bereshit Rabba* (78:1), ‘Every day God creates a legion of angels; they sing before Him, and disappear.’”

Another Midrash contradicted this. The angel who wrestled with Jacob (Gen. 32:26) was *also* the guardian angel of Esau (Edom). As “Edom” is still with us, that angel *endures*.

When, in opposition...other statements were quoted to the effect that angels are eternal—and, in fact, it has repeatedly been shown that they live permanently—the reply was given that

some angels live permanently, while others perish; and this is really the case; *for individual forces are transient, whilst the genera are permanent and imperishable.*”

(*sh'ha-kokhot halalu ha-ishim hayim-nifsadim b'tadirut, u'minei otan ha-kokhot kayamim v'einam nifsadim. Edom endures: Eicha Rabbah 3:8, “R. Berakhya said.” Some endure, others perish: ibid., and R. Helbo's reply to R. Berakhya. Also, Bereshit Rabba 78:1.*)

Just as in Aristotle's description of the universal and particular forces, so, in Judaism's angelic system “The individual forces are transient, while the *genera* are permanent and imperishable.” This doctrine of permanent angels arose from the rabbis' discussion of Rafael as the force of healing, Michael as the angel of annunciation, and Gabriel as the force of strength in the account of the angelic visitation after Abraham's circumcision, prior to Sodom's destruction.

(*Ber. Rabbah 50:2. Aristotle's universals: Metaphysics 1033a1-2, 1045a-b—1050a5-10 inter alia.*)

This system is not just a mindless cause-and-effect machine. These angelic forces perform minor miracles, as in the case of Judah and Tamar, where an angelic emissary moves the story along:

“Again, we read, in reference to the relation between Judah and Tamar (*Ber. Rabba 85:8 to Gen. 38:14, et seq.*): ‘R. Jochanan said that Judah sought to pass by [*l'avor*, to avoid the meeting], but God caused the angel of lust, i.e., the libidinous disposition, to present himself to him.’ This force is here called an angel. Likewise, we often meet with the phrase ‘the angel set over a certain thing.’” (‘Angel of lust ... disposition’: *malakh mamona al ha-taava, k'lomar koakh ha-kishui*, lit., force of erection, see *Alkali Dictionary* 2361, Jud.Ar.: קוּחַ אֱלֹהִים אֵי.)

The point is that when the rabbis discussed physical forces, even those we might not think of as heavenly, like the force attending the arousal of libido, they did not scruple to call that force an angel, as here, the angel in charge of lust.

The angel in charge. Shlomo Pines' translation conveys the idea of the last quoted sentence better than Friedlander's version (quoted directly above):

“And thus, you will find that they constantly speak of an angel *put in charge* of this or that (*malakh sh'hu mamunei al kakh v'kakh*). For every force charged by God, may He be exalted, with some business, is an angel *put in charge* of that thing,” (*hu malakh ha-mamunei al oto davar.*)

Maimonides wants us to see that the permanent angels rule the transient angels. They are “appointed over” (*mamunei*) or *put in charge* of those individuals, as their form or paradigm, just as the angel appointed over lust was put in charge of Judah's “libidinous disposition.”

R. Even-Shmuel writes that this should be a master key for you (*ze yihyei l'mafteakh b'yadekha*), such that whenever the rabbis say that “this angel is appointed” over something, for example, the angel appointed over human conception, we should know that this type of natural force is a general function charged by God to the particular *malakh*. (For example, the angel of conception is named *Laila*: Job 3:3, *Niddah*, 16b; another Midrash makes the angel *Michael* responsible for engendering Judah's lust, Ginzberg, *Legends* 2:1:66).

These appointed species-angels rule their particular occurrences in nature. As rulers they can do many things, while the transient angels that they rule can do only one.

R. Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, a medieval Guide commentator (1225 – c. 1290), explained that transient angels only do one thing because they are non-composite and simple, unlike men. Men are composed of many forces, and can, therefore, do a thing as well as its opposite. Similarly, the

universal species forces do several things: “Thus you find that they constantly speak of ‘an angel put in charge of *this or that*’ (*malakh sh’hu mamunei al kakh v’kakh*).” (Pines trans. p. 264.)

ANGELS AS MENTAL FACULTIES AND IN PROPHETIC VISIONS

In Guide 2:41 Maimonides wrote “... A prophet is sometimes called ‘angel.’” In Guide 2:42, he wrote: ‘We have already shown (Guide 2:6) that the term ‘angel’ is homonymous, denoting also ‘prophet.’ He explained in our chapter that this is an extension of meaning since “[Angels are] the separate intellects that appear to the prophets in the vision of prophecy.” For, as he wrote in our chapter, the “psychical” forces are also angels.

How can an angel can be both a prophet and a separate intellect? How can an angel be both a particular and a universal force, *i.e.*, a genus and an individual? How it could also be an element?

This may become easier when we recognize that angelic forces are noetic, *i.e.*, minds and ideas. Ideas can manifest themselves in a variety of ways: as species, as elemental forces, and as prophetic minds.

“The elements are also called angels,” *afilu hayisodot n’krait gam hem malakhim*. The elements in nature are mixed and, therefore, corporeal, since all composites are corporeal. However, the pure unmixed forms from which they derive are noetic. That is why Maimonides called them angels. (Composites: Guide 2:Intro., Prop. XXI and XXII. Elemental form as “corporeal form,” Wolfson, *Crescas’ Critique*, 100-101 and notes.)

Having shown in the account of Judah and Tamar that angels actualize even our lowest drives, Maimonides raised his sights to portray the angelic process in our minds and the prophet’s minds. It turns out that the prophets’ mental faculties are also angels. The prophets prophesy because of their special intellectual makeup. Their minds are tuned to receive divine transmissions, which are incorporeal ideas. Angelic messengers carry those messages to the prophet’s mental faculties, which are also called angels.

He noticed a Midrash to a passage in Ecclesiastes which dramatized this angelology of thought:

“...The *natural* and *psychical* forces of an individual are called angels....In *Midrash Koheleth* (on Eccles. 10:7) the following passage occurs: ‘When man sleeps, his soul speaks to the angel, the angel to the cherub.’ The intelligent reader will find here a clear statement that man’s imaginative faculty is also called ‘angel,’ and that ‘cherub’ is used for man’s intellectual faculty. How beautiful must this appear to him who understands it; how absurd (*kaoor*—Pines: ‘distasteful’) to the ignorant!”

The Ecclesiastes passage, which he did not quote, reads, “Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter” (Eccles. 10:20). The Talmud (*Berakhot* 8b) supplies the traditional gloss: ‘Do not talk among the walls, for the walls have ears,’” but even outside your walls, the way you carry yourself reveals the truth to your superiors. The Midrash, however, took an utterly different approach, focusing on the “bird of the air...which hath wings”:

“‘That which hath wings shall tell the matter’ – Rabbi Bon said: When a person sleeps, the body speaks to the soul, the soul speaks to the spirit, the spirit to the angel, the angel to the cherub, and the cherub to the winged one. Who is that? It is the seraph. The seraph brings the

matter before He who spoke and the world came to be.” (Midrash Koh.10:20, Maimonides’ quote-shards in greyscale)

Maimonides read the Midrash as a description of the mechanism of prophecy, i.e., how it comes to prophets in dreams and visions of the night. The mental faculties are prophecy’s instruments. The Midrash calls those faculties souls, spirits, angels, cherubs and seraphs. The passage speaks of six stages of transmission, but Maimonides chose three: 1) the “soul,” which is the angel of the *common sense*, 2) the “angel,” which we call the *imagination*, and 3) the “cherub” of the *intellect*.

The Prophetic Process: He superimposed this psychological structure over the account from his essay *Eight Chapters* of three of our mental faculties (*Perush haMishnah*, Intro. to *Pirkei Avot*, ch. 1):

1. The *common sense*, which gathers data transmitted to the five senses.
(See H. A. Wolfson, “Maimonides on the Internal Senses,” *Studies in the Hist. of Phil. and Rel.*, v. 1, 344. In the *Eight Chapters* Maimonides called it generally the faculty of “sensation,” *marginish*.)
2. The *imagination*, which is:
“The faculty that retains impressions of things perceptible to the mind after they have ceased to affect the senses which conceived them...Combining some of those impressions and separating others from one another, it constructs ideas, some of which it has never received any impression, and which it could not possibly have perceived.” (*Eight Chapters*, Gorfinkle trans).
3. Finally, the *intellect* is “That faculty peculiar to man which enables him to understand, reflect, acquire knowledge of the sciences, and to discriminate between proper and improper actions.” (*ibid.*). It includes both the *potential* and *active intellect*.

In the *Eight Chapters* he explained the dynamic nature of our *potential* intellect, which is our inborn un-actualized potential to know, and our ethical duties toward our intellect.

“...Know that this single soul, whose powers or parts are described above, is like matter, and the intellect is its form. If it does not attain its form [the *active intellect*], the existence of its capacity to receive this form is for nought and is, as it were, futile. This is the meaning of his [Solomon’s] statement: ‘Indeed, without knowledge a soul is not good’ (Proverbs 19:2). He means that *the existence of a soul that does not attain its form, but is a soul without knowledge, is not good.*” (*Eight Chapters*, trans., Weiss and Butterworth, p. 64, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*.)

His medieval commentator Efodi illustrated the process involved in the formation of ideas:

“The form falls first on the common sense (*b’khush ha-meshutaf*), which is the soul (*hu ha-nefesh*), and from the common sense it proceeds to the imagination (*ha-m’dama*), and from the imagination to the faculty of the intellect (*ha-koakh ha-maskil*) which is the cherub.”
(My trans, 23b, *ad loc.* Efodi was the pen name of Profiat Duran, R. Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, c. 1350 – c. 1415)

The prophet’s mind receives divine transmissions from God. Maimonides named the mind’s angels, but did not explain here how the process works. However, in Guide 2:36 he wrote “Prophecy is...an emanation sent forth by the divine being through the medium of the Active Intellect, in the first instance to man’s rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty...”

Narboni explained the psychology involved, and why it must occur in dreams and visions:

“Why do people sleep? The single soul is subject to several faculties that *suppress* (*yaiku*) each other. While awake the external impressions suppress the internal ones. During sleep, the natural forces return to their source (*hatkhalatam*), so that the soul can complete its actualization (*l’hashlim paala*). Then each of those achieved forces [that achieved their actualization] can *subdue* (*yakhniu*) the forms they received when awake.” (My trans. of Narboni, *ad loc.*, p. 28a, Vienna edition, 1748. Narboni was the pen name of R. Moses of Narbonne, born end of 13th C.- died c. 1362.)

Sleep blocks the constant bombardment of daytime stimuli so that the mind can commune with God.

R. Even-Shmuel explained how Maimonides’ theory would fit the six stages in the actual Midrash. The *soul* absorbs physical sense impressions by day, while during sleep it delivers its impressions to the *imaginative* faculty, the home of images, dreams and prophecies. The *imaginative* faculty must then give an account to the *material intellect* (the “cherub”) which is connected (*davek*) to the *active intellect* (the “seraph”), just as the active intellect is connected to God.

(On the terms *material*, *potential* or *common* intellect: see chapter-essay to Guide 1:68, “The Debate on the Nature of the Potential Intellect.”)

Some might not be impressed by the Midrashic psychology of prophecy. Maimonides wrote: “How beautiful must this appear to he who understands it; how absurd [distasteful] to the ignorant!”

He meant that the corporealists, for whom angels have real wings, would not digest the concept of angels linking human and divine minds. But it would also be hard for moderns, especially academics, for whom Maimonides’ psychological angels would seem like mere superstition.

TOWARD A CLASSIFICATION OF THE PROPHETS AND THEIR PROPHETIC VISIONS

All this is prelude to Maimonides’ account of prophecy (Guide 2:32-47). Maimonides will devote his extraordinary powers of identification and classification to the different visions of angels in Guide 2:44-45. He explained in our chapter the problem that these many images posed:

“The forms in which angels appear form part of the prophetic vision. Some prophets see angels in the *form of man*, e.g., ‘And behold three men stood by him’ (Gen. 18:2); others perceive an angel as a *fearful and terrible being*, e.g., ‘His countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible’ (Judges 13:6); others see them as *fire*, e.g., ‘And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the heart of a flame of fire’ (Exod. 3:2). In *Bereshit Rabba* (50:2) the following remark occurs: ‘To Abraham, whose prophetic power was great, the angels appeared in the form of men; to Lot, whose power was weak, they appeared as *angels*.’ *This is an important principle (sod, lit. “secret”) as regards prophecy; it [prophecy] will be fully discussed (Guide 2: 32-47). Another passage in Ber. Rabba (50:3) runs thus: ‘Before the angels have accomplished their task they are called men, when they have accomplished it they are angels.’ Consider how clearly they say that 1) the term ‘angel’ signifies nothing but a certain action, and that 2) every appearance of an angel is part of a prophetic vision, 3) depending on the capacity of the person that perceives it.”*

(“A certain action”: *hu asiat davar*; Pines: “a certain act,” i.e., a process, an actualization of a potentiality. Enumeration supplied.)

Since every person sees the angel differently it is obvious that it has no fixed image. Angels are incorporeal, and therefore lack physical form or shape. The profusion of angelic figures that people imagine guarantees that they have no image outside the imagination. The angel is real, but its “form” is produced by the seer’s dreams and visions, nowhere else. Maimonides’ prophetic “secret” is that the angel is an *action*, in a *vision*, and the quality of the vision hinges on the *quality* of the prophet.

The Different Prophetic Capacities of Prophets: The perfection of each prophet’s imaginative vision varies “depending on the capacity of the person that perceives it.” The visions are an index to the perfection of the prophet’s mind. Maimonides examined this factor in four extraordinary cases.

The first is the case of Manoah and his wife, who *think* they have seen a terrifying angelic apparition:

“The angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son (Samson)... Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, A man of God came unto me, and his countenance was like the countenance (*k'marei*) of an angel of God, very terrible...” (Judges 13:3-6).

It was “like” an angel, but it was not an angel. Since they were not prophets, and had not prepared themselves to be prophets, what they perceived was a *bat-kol*. Maimonides explained in Guide 2:42:

“From the rule laid down by us that *prophecy requires preparation*, and from our interpretation of the homonym ‘angel,’ you will infer that Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was not a prophetess; also Manoah and his wife were no prophets: for the speech they heard, or imagined they heard, was like the *bat-kol* (prophetic echo), which is so frequently mentioned by our Sages, and is something that may be experienced by men not prepared for prophecy. The homonymity of the word ‘angel’ misleads in this matter...”

R. Michael Friedlander did his best to explain the phenomenon of the *bat-kol*:

“Lit., ‘The daughter of a voice.’ By ‘voice’ the voice of God is meant, which was perceived directly or indirectly by the prophets; the qualifying term *bat* (daughter) has here the meaning of ‘young’ and ‘weak,’ so that *bat-kol* denotes ‘a faint voice,’ a divine communication perceived very faintly; something uncommon or supernatural, but no real revelation.”
(Friedlander, note 2, v. II, p 199, in the footnoted edition of his translation of Guide 2:42.)

Next in significance is Abraham’s nephew Lot. Genesis 18 and 19 contrasted Lot’s vision with Abraham’s. Lot’s status is unclear. The canonical list of forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses (*Megillah* 14a, *Bava Batra* 14b, and commentaries) does not include him, but it was nonexclusive. Neither does Lot appear in Maimonides’ list in Guide 2:45, but that was also nonexclusive.

The problem is that when Abraham, healing from his circumcision in Genesis 18, was visited by the angels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael (*Bava Metzia* 86b), he does not call them angels but *men*: “And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three *men* (*anashim*) stood by him.” Two of them, Gabriel and Michael, appeared to Lot in Genesis 19 as *angels*: “And there came two *angels* (*ha-malakhim*) to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them.”

Why do two of the same angels appear to Abraham as men and to Lot as angels? Most commentators agreed that since Abraham was at home in the spiritual world angels were to him like ordinary individuals, while for Lot, at home in the marketplace, they were terrifying angelic apparitions.

A different explanation quoted by Maimonides reads “Before the angels have accomplished their task, they are called men, when they have accomplished it, they are angels,” (*Ber. Rabba* 50:3). The idea here is that when the angels came to Abraham, they had not yet performed their four assigned tasks of visiting the sick patriarch, announcing the birth of Isaac, saving Lot, and destroying Sodom, and so they appeared as “men,” but while visiting Lot they performed those tasks as “angels.” Be that as it may, Maimonides drew only one point from this Midrash: that *angels are actions*.

Maimonides needed one more example of the different visions of angels: Moses at the burning bush: “And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in the heart of a fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed” (Ex. 3:2). Here, Moses, the prophet that eclipses all others, revealed his first vision to the world. From this revelation Maimonides derived the axiom opening this chapter-essay, that angels precede prophecy, and that prophecy precedes Torah. Though Moses will later commune directly with God without imagery, at this stage the message comes to him as an angel in the *form* (“heart,” see Efodi *ad loc.*) of a flame.

Having canvassed these four questionable appearances of “angels,” the examples of Manoah and his wife, Lot, Abraham and Moses, Maimonides comes to his point: “This is a great prophetic secret.” What is the secret? And why is it a secret?

Efodi struggles to explain the secret, taking three tries to come close to the answer. His conclusion:

“*This is a great prophetic secret...*The answer [to grasp the secret] is that he [Moses] envisioned the angel in the *form* of the heart of fire, and so the purpose of this chapter was *to justify the real existence of incorporeal beings though they appear in our minds*, and [the reason that this is a secret] is because this subject is part of the lore of *Maaseh Merkava*.” (My trans of Efodi at 24a. Lit. “...Meaning in the *form* of the ‘heart of fire,’” *b'levat esh r'l b'tzurot levat esh*, i.e., its shape.)

The answer is that the various different *images* of angels in the mind exist only in the mind. The angels have real existence but no real shape. They are incorporeal. Nonetheless, these depictions have meaning for us since they indicate the prophet’s prophetic capacity. Form follows function, since the form that the prophet perceived, while otherwise meaningless, expresses something about the angel’s function, message, or manner of completing its mission. Thus, the “angel wings” that appear in many visions tell us about the immediacy of angelic action, like a bird’s flight, performed in no-time, at the speed of thought. It is also clear that the more sublime the vision, the better prepared and endowed the prophet. We can usually conclude that the percipients are not prophets when their images come from terror, as in the case of Manoah and his wife. (“According to the capacity of the person that perceives it,” *kfi matzav hamasig*, and see R. Kafih, note 64: *kfi dragato u'maalato b'hsagat ha-muscalot*. “Wings”: Guide 1:43.)

Finally, as Efodi pointed out, since this secret concerns God’s providential supervision of our world, we know that it must be part of the divine science of *Maaseh Merkava*, which cannot be taught in public. (Mishnah *Hagigah*, second *perek*. See my chapter-essays on Guide *Introduction I*, and 1:32-35).

ANGELS: A DEFINITION?

At this point, summarizing what we have learned, we hazard a “definition” of the term *malakh*, following our usual method in the lexical chapters of the Guide. Maimonides’ wealth of different angels demands a lexical accounting. The problem is that he does not treat the angelology of this chapter like his typical lexical chapters.

The difficulty of defining angels should not surprise us. Just as God cannot be defined, incorporeal beings, like angels, cannot be defined.

It is not even clear that more than one incorporeal being exists. In general, numerosity is a hallmark of physical things, *unless* a good case can be made for numbering incorporeals. According to the controversial doctrine of the *unity of mind*, there is no obvious reason to make distinctions in the noetic world. Maimonides struggled with this issue previously, theorizing that a limited number of

minds could be causes of one another, and that minds might also be distinguished in virtue of their accomplishments. (Aristotle similarly differentiated souls based on honor and dishonor, *De Generatione Animalium*, 736b30. See my chapter-essays on Guide 2:Introduction, Proposition III, and Guide 1:68 regarding numerosity and Ibn Bajja's doctrine of the unity of mind.)

Maimonides states that the term *malakh* is homonymous, since, in its first and second entries below, it refers to *human* messengers and prophets, while the other definitions refer to *incorporeal* beings.

Bearing these provisos in mind, we categorize angels by their *manifestation to us*, and by their assigned *functions*. These entries are loosely drawn, and non-exclusive.

Malakh/Angel (Homonymous)

1. *Messenger*. This is the primary and original meaning. Each of the following entries brings with it the idea of *a being who carries a message*, i.e., informational content. Since they can be human or angelic, corporeal or incorporeal, *malakh* is a homonymous term. (Human messengers: Jacob's *malakhim* sent to Esau, Gen. 32:4).
2. *Prophet*. Prophets are messengers of God. (In our chapter: "There is no doubt that the word 'angel' is used... of a prophet." Also see Guide 2:41 and 42.)
3. *Separate intellects*. Under this entry Maimonides *says* that he had in mind the intellects shown to prophets in visions. Nonetheless, he then linked the *separate intellects* with our mental faculties (see entry 4, below) as part of the prophetic process. Up till now the Guide's concern had been the separate intellects as rulers of the spheres (hence, as supernal rulers, *elokim*). This entry would also include the ultimate noetic forms of Plato. Those eternal paradigms are the source of the individual forms in everyday life (see #5 below), just as chairs participate in chair-ness. He located these forms in the *Pamalia*, the heavenly host, which he linked to the world of the Platonic forms, citing a passage in *Timaeus*. This *Pamalia* is the home the rabbis gave the angels, just as Philo Judaeus (c. 20 BCE-c.50 CE) situated Plato's homeless forms in the *Logos*.
4. *Mental faculties*, including the imagination, the potential intellect, and the active intellect which links us to the divine. Maimonides identified two of those mental faculties with angels: "*The imaginative faculty is likewise called an angel and the intellect is called a cherub...*" His commentators linked the active intellect with the "seraph."
5. *Animating forces*. R. Kafih relates these to the *angel of lust* in Judah's encounter with Tamar. This makes for some ambiguity. Definition 3 above referred to entirely *incorporeal* angelic forces, while these in Definition 5 are forces *animating bodies*. They are placed *with* these bodies to perform divinely intended actions. These *animal* forces include *forces of resistance*, like those which prevented action by Balaam's ass and Daniel's lion. They also include the *formative force* in the human seed that prepares our physical characteristics. Maimonides simplified this complicated picture when he wrote here that "All forces are forms" including all the forces described here. While the vast numbers of such forces have but one mission and then disappear, angels "appointed over" particular processes endure. Thus, the particular instance of lust that impelled Judah to Tamar comes under the control of the enduring angel appointed over all occurrences of lust. (Maimonides' simplification of nomenclature: He collapsed many things into the idea of *force*, now identified with angels. Wolfson wrote, *Crescas' Critique*, p. 99, that "Force, therefore, designates existence *in something else*, and is used by Maimonides in Props. X, XI, XII, and XVI, to include accidents, forms, the lower faculties of the rational soul, the internal principle of motion, and the universals, all of which require *something else in which to exist*." See my Guide:II Intro., Prop. X.)
6. *Elemental sources*. Not fire, air, water, and earth as we find them, but the pure *forms* or paradigms that rule those elements.

7. *Any incorporeal intermediary*, including the divine Will, as well as that sixth class of angels that Maimonides called ‘*malakhim*’ in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei 2:7*. *Malakh* can also be applied generically for *any* entry in that list of the ten classes of angels.

CONCLUSIONS

“This is a great prophetic secret....Consider how clearly they [the rabbis] say that 1) the term ‘angel’ signifies nothing but *a certain action*, and that 2) every appearance of an angel is *part of a prophetic vision*, 3) depending on the *capacity* of the person that perceives it.”

Maimonides draws his conclusions. An angel is an activity, the living means by which God actualizes the potentiality in the universe. Their activity is their message. They impart their will to live to all things. Because they are incorporeal, they are only glimpsed in prophetic vision. The different images they manifest bespeak the quality of seer’s prophecy.

“There is nothing in the opinion of Aristotle on this subject contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The *whole difference between him and ourselves is this*: he believes all these beings to be eternal, co-existing with the First Cause as its necessary effect [i.e., neo-Platonic emanation]; *but we believe* 1) that they have had a beginning, 2) that God created the Intelligences, and 3) [that He] gave the spheres the capacity of seeking to become like them [like the separate intellects]: and, that in creating the Intelligences and the spheres, 4) He endowed them with their governing powers. In this [these four ways] we differ from him.”

He claims that nothing in the Jewish teaching about angels contradicts Aristotelianism, except that in Judaism God created the angels and gave them their powers and their mission. The other unstated difference, that Judaism could not abide, was that the Aristotle made his intelligences eternal gods.

Maimonides restored the living, breathing, and volitional elements to Aristotelian science. His angelic system better reflects the world’s manifest intelligence.

“In the course of this treatise we shall give his [Aristotle’s] theory [of the eternity of the uncreated universe] as well as the theory of *creatio ex nihilo* taught in Scripture.”

The key difference is that in Judaism God *transcendent* endows his emissaries with their governing power. By contrast, the divine *familia* of Aristotle was entirely *immanent*, dependent on the world. The differences between those two outlooks flow from the debate over how the world came to be, which Maimonides will treat in subsequent chapters of the first part of this volume of the Guide.

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