

GUIDE 1:13 STAND

This is a lexical chapter. See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.” We learn that the prophet who “stands” is the mediating channel between man and God.

AMIDA: (STANDING) Homonym

1. To stand upright.
2. To stop, cease or interrupt.
3. To endure, to be permanent, especially referring to God or his works. *Possibly*: When referring to God, *amida* means “to cause,” an “intermediate cause,” or (with Moses) to “cause to prophesy.”

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And Joseph [was] thirty years old when he stood (*b'amdo*) before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 41:46)

This verse outwardly illustrates the physical definition of “standing.” But Joseph’s first appearance before Pharaoh is like a resurrection, since he was last seen hopelessly imprisoned in a pit in the ground. He had once before been buried in a pit by his brothers and resurrected. While we recognize a continuation of last chapter’s theme of *ascent in rank*, i.e., from prison to royalty, this new theme of *resurrection* is more important, for it recurs in Maimonides’ next proof-text.

“Then said the Lord unto me, though Moses and Samuel *stood* (*ya'amod*) before me, [yet] my mind [could] not [be] toward this people: cast [them] out of my sight, and let them go forth.” (Jeremiah 15:1)

Jeremiah relates God’s warning: even prayer will not save the unrepentant Jews. Even were Moses and Samuel to stand in their graves to intercede for them, this could not prevent their punishment. The *resurrection* theme links this quote to the prior one, for Jeremiah envisions the image of leaders resurrected. Maimonides does not address bodily resurrection in the Guide directly. In *Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 10:1 he pronounced corporal resurrection one of the thirteen articles of faith. Nevertheless, critics accused him of forsaking the belief in resurrection. He responded by writing the *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead* (*Maamar Tekhiat Ha-Metim*). In the *Treatise*, resurrection is a miracle for the future, beyond human explanation, but by no means the most remarkable of God’s miracles.

“And he (Abraham) took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set [it] before them; and he *stood* (*omed*) by them under the tree, and they did eat.” (Genesis 18:8)

The context is Abraham serving dinner to the angelic guests. Maimonides always connects his special doctrine of prophecy to Genesis Chapter 18. This doctrine maintains that if an angel or a prophetic vision is mentioned anywhere in a biblical chapter, then the *whole series* of actions take place in the prophetic dream-vision (see Guide 2:42). The doctrine has been controversial. If Abraham envisioned God even once in the narration, then the whole chapter took place in a prophetic dream, including the details of the preparation of the meal, and so on. This doctrine does not apply to Moses. Unlike all other prophets, Moses received revelations while awake. Since all actions occurring in Genesis 18 occur in the dream, they are subject to Maimonides’ prophetic dream exegesis techniques. This passage opens the main subject of our chapter, prophecy; and, especially, the distinction between Mosaic prophecy and that of all other prophets.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“When I had waited, for they spake not, but *stood (amdu)* still, [and] answered no more.” (Job 32:16)

The context of this passage is the beginning of Elihu’s speeches to Job. Maimonides has a major section on the book of Job, Guide 3:22-23. He holds Elihu’s speeches in high regard. In this case, “stood still” means to stop speaking. See essay below on the special role of Elihu in Maimonides’ theory of the interpretation of prophecy.

“And she (Leah) conceived again, and bare a son: and she said, now will I praise the Lord: therefore she called his name Judah; and *left bearing (va-ta’amod miledet)*.” (Genesis 29:35)

Here again, “standing” means “ceasing,” in this case, from childbirth. This quotation may not add anything new, but see essay below on Elihu’s principle that unremarkable quotations serve as camouflage.

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may *continue (yaamdu—stand)* many days.” (Jeremiah 32:14)

In context, the Jews face certain exile, yet God tells Jeremiah to buy land from his cousin. By this purchase, he preserves his family’s hereditary right in the land. The prophecy and the purchase suggest eventual redemption from exile and return to Jerusalem. The mechanics of the transaction, on the Babylonian model, involve two written deeds in land, one inside an earthenware vessel sealed with clay, and one printed on the outside. If people thought that the outside text was tampered with, they broke open the vessel before the court to compare the original. Our verse carries forward the last chapter’s interest in property law. Maimonides says that *yaamdu* in this passage should be interpreted “to be enduring and lasting.” Perhaps the law of property ownership represents man’s frail attempt to secure some measure of *permanence* in this world.

“If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee [so], then thou shalt be able to *endure (amod)*, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace.” (Exodus 18:23)

In this passage Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, argues for the creation of the first judiciary. In Guide 1:10 Maimonides brought another proof-text about the inception of this forerunner of the Sanhedrin, Numbers 11:17. That passage stood for the definition of *yarad* as the descent of divine holiness upon places, people and institutions. It specifically meant the descent of prophecy upon the leaders of Israel. In our verse, people will “stand,” *endure*, through the institutionalization of prophetic insight in their political system. The *Mekhilta* on this passage, brought by Rashi, suggests another issue. He says that the verse means, “Consult God; if He commands you to do this, you will be able to endure, but if He *prevents* you (from doing it), you will be unable to endure.” The *Mekhilta* thereby points to a new Maimonidean theme, the *prevention* of prophecy. Maimonides contends that prophecy *naturally* descends upon the properly prepared prophet, *but only if God does not prevent it* (Guide 2:32, 3d Opinion).

“Moab hath been at ease from his youth, and he hath settled on his lees, and hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel, neither hath he gone into captivity: therefore his taste *remained (amad)* in him, and his scent is not changed.” (Jeremiah 48:11)

Jeremiah compares Moab to stored wine. “It has settled on its lees” means that the wine absorbs taste from the grape remnants in the bottle. If they are good, the wine is improved, if not, its taste is bad. Moab, unlike Israel, did not suffer exile—it was not “emptied from vessel to vessel.” Nonetheless, it is a bad concoction, though anciently preserved in its territory. Maimonides comments: “it has continued and remained in existence without any change.” Note that this passage employs an image similar to the one used by Jeremiah, the earthenware vessel that preserves evidence of permanent territorial ownership.

“His work [is] honourable and glorious: and his righteousness *endureth (omedet—stands)* for ever.” (Psalms 111:3)

To say that God’s righteousness “stands” means, according to Maimonides, that “it is permanent and everlasting.”

“And His feet shall *stand* (*ve-'amdu*) in that day upon the mount of Olives, which [is] before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, [and there shall be] a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.” (Zechariah 14:4)

This is a transitional quotation moving toward the ideas of the next chapter and of Guide 1:28. Zechariah foretells that though things look bad for Israel, God will again “stand” in Jerusalem and move mountains to bring peace for the Jews. For Maimonides, it means that God will *cause* his emanation to dwell there, so that prophecy can once more arise. He calls this another instance of Definition 3, but goes on to say that it means, “His causes, i.e., the events of which he is the cause (the effects) will remain efficient (*yitkaamo sibotav k'lomar m'sovevav*); this will be further elucidated when we speak of the meaning of *regel* (foot) [in Guide 1:28].” This is different from the other proof-texts for Definition 3 because the verse mentions “His feet,” *raglav*. Since God has no feet, Maimonides explains in Guide 1:28 that “foot” means “cause.” “Foot” is a euphemism for the male principle. In this quote and the next two, “stand,” *amida*, means “to cause” and specifically, “to cause prophecy.”

“But as for thee, *stand* (*amod*) thou here by me, and I will speak unto thee all the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which thou shalt teach them, that they may do [them] in the land which I give them to possess it.” (Deuteronomy 5:27)

In this quote and the next from Deuteronomy Chapter 5, the Jews have asked Moses to intercede with God to receive the law. He thus becomes the mediator between God and the people, channeling the prophetic emanation. In the same sense as the prior quote from Zechariah, when Moses “stands” with God, it means he is “caused to prophecy” and made to be the mediating channel.

“I *stood* (*omed*) between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the word of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount.” (Deuteronomy 5:5)

The verse completes Maimonides’ thought from the prior two texts: to say that Moses “stood” means that God *caused* him to be the prophetic channel for the revelation of Torah. One line up, at Deuteronomy 5:4, we learned that “The Lord talked with you (Moses) face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire.” These passages demonstrate the uniqueness of Moses’ prophecy. Maimonides’ doctrine is that Moses’ prophecy is distinguished from other prophets because of its characteristics of wakefulness, directness, clarity, and boldness (Guide 1:63; Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei HaTorah* 7:6). Prophecy is subject to Moses’ will, and he is constantly ready to receive it. Alone among the prophets, he separates from his wife, making God his constant preoccupation. Finally, He alone is on a mission from God to bring law to the world. Moses is the first prophet-king who is a law-giver, and since Maimonides understands all prophets to be philosophers, he is a philosopher-king as well. Maimonides says that Moses has reached a higher stage of evolution: “He was the chosen one of all mankind, superior in attaining knowledge of God to any other person who ever lived or ever will live. He surpassed the human condition and attained the angelic (*hu alav ha-shalom higia hitaluto min ha-enoshit ad ha-maala ha-malakhit, v'n'klal b'maala ha-malakhit*). There remained no veil he did not rend and penetrate behind, nothing physical to held him back This is what is meant by saying that he spoke to God without angelic mediation.” (Commentary on the Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 10, *Helek*, Seventh Fundamental Principle; A. J. Wolf translation.)

ELIHU ON PROPHECY

“When I had waited, (for they spake not, but *stood* (*amdu*) still, [and] answered no more). [I said], I will answer also my part, I also will shew mine opinion. For I am full of matter, the spirit within me constraineth me.” (Job 32:16-18)

This passage introduces us to one of Job’s friends, Elihu, who Maimonides calls the best of his interlocutors. Since Maimonides told us to link passages together to understand his intent (see Guide: Introduction), we should take a brief look at Guide 3:23. We learn two things there about Elihu: his system of literary concealment; and his explanation of the prophetic process. Guide 3:22 and 3:23 are an important section of the Guide, in which Maimonides provides his understanding of the “strange and wonderful Book of Job.”

In 3:23, we learn of Elihu's rhetorical method:

“A profound and wonderful discourse then follows. Reflecting on his words we may at first thought be surprised to find that he does not add anything to the words of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zofar; and that he only repeats their ideas in other terms and more explicitly. For he likewise censures and rebukes Job, attributes justice to God, relates His wonders in nature, and holds that God is not affected by the service of the worshipper, nor by the disobedience of the rebellious. All this has already been said by His colleagues. But after due consideration we see clearly the new idea introduced by Elihu, which is the principal object of his speech, an idea which has not been uttered by those who spoke before him. In addition to this he mentions also other things set forth by the previous speakers, in the same manner as each of the rest, viz., Job and his three friends, repeat what the others have said. *The purpose of this repetition is to conceal the opinion peculiar to each speaker, and to make all appear in the eyes of the ordinary reader to utter one and the same view, although in reality this is not the case.*” (My italics)

The reason Maimonides now directs us here is to clarify his own methodology in these lexical chapters. Several of the quotes above, for instance, do not seem to introduce anything new. We originally said that Maimonides does not quote as lawyers do, piling on to deaden opposition. For him each quotation has purpose. Nonetheless, when he adds apparently unremarkable quotations, we may well ask whether he is following Elihu's method of using proof-texts to camouflage from the unqualified reader profound ideas about the concealed subjects of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*.

Next, we see the idea that Elihu has concealed, suggesting an understanding of prophecy similar to Maimonides' understanding:

“The new idea, which is peculiar to Elihu and has not been mentioned by the others, is contained in his metaphor of the angel's intercession. It is a frequent occurrence, he says, that a man becomes ill, approaches the gates of death, and is already given up by his neighbors. If then an angel, of any kind whatever, intercedes on his behalf and prays for him, the intercession and prayers are accepted; the patient rises from his illness, is saved, and returns to good health. This result is not always obtained: intercession and deliverance do not always follow each other: it happens only twice, or three times. (In other words, God can *prevent* providential intercession.) Elihu therefore says: ‘If there be an angel with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to show unto man his uprightness,’ etc. (33:29). He then describes man's condition when convalescent and the rejoicing at his recovery, and continues thus: ‘Lo, all these things worketh God twice, three times with man’ (*ibid.* 29). This idea occurs only in the words of Elihu. His description of the method of prophecy in preceding verses is likewise new. He says: ‘Surely God speaketh in one way, yea in two ways, yet man perceiveth it not. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon man, in slumberings upon the bed’ (*ibid.* 14, 15).”

The last line reminds us of Maimonides' special doctrine of prophecy announced in Guide 2:42: a mention of an angel or a vision in any biblical chapter about the prophet's actions means that the entire chapter takes place in a prophetic dream vision. Thus, in Genesis 18, everything that happened to Abraham was part of his dream. For prophets who are not Moses, that vision takes place “In a dream, in a vision of the night when deep sleep falleth upon man.”

The second idea is that the angelic intercession “speaketh in *one* way” through the *imagination* of the dreamer, and possibly “yea in *two* ways” through the *imagination* and the *intellect* (See Guide 2:32), but only some are predisposed to hear it, and only a few of those can benefit from it. Those alone benefit who are physically, morally, and intellectually prepared (Friedlander, note 1, Guide 3:23, *ad loc.*, p. 109). The angel is the “active intellect,” the *sefira* of *malkhut*, the result of intellectual unification with divine emanation. Moreover, there is a note in the passage above, which resounds in Guide 1:51: divine providence is directly relative to a man's ability

to keep God as his constant contemplation, as it says, “I keep the Lord always before me” (Psalm 16:9, quoted in Guide 3:51). Here Elihu has a similar idea; conjunction with the Divine angel cures disease. Maimonides recognizes in Elihu’s convalescent’s revival a suggestion of the resurrection of the dead. Two other proof-texts in our chapter suggest this principle of the faith. Elihu links the coming of the angel to the sufferer’s repentance; that is, the return (*teshuva*) of the soul to its home in the active intellect, which is the image of God. Surely the great physician of body and soul, Maimonides, was deeply impressed with Elihu’s prognosis and prescription:

“In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; Then He openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction, that He may withdraw man [from his] purpose, and hide pride from man. He keepeth back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword. He is chastened also with pain upon his bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong [pain]: So that his life abhorreth bread, and his soul dainty meat. His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen; and his bones [that] were not seen stick out. Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers. If there be a messenger (*malakh* = angel) with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness. Then He is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child’s: he shall return to the days of his youth. He shall pray unto God, and He will be favourable unto him: and he shall see His face with joy: for He will render unto man his righteousness. He looketh upon men, and [if any] say, I have sinned, and perverted [that which was] right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light. Lo, all these [things] worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” (Job 33:15-33)

Copyright © 2017, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted without express written permission of the author.