

GUIDE 1:49
ANGELS, PROVIDENCE AND THE ETERNAL FEMININE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, Maimonides sketches his views on angels. We learn how they fit into his scheme of providence and into his conception of the Work of the Chariot, the *Maaseh Merkava*. The key is this: in prophecy, a feminine angel can represent unformed matter.

Maimonides presumes our familiarity with passages from his Mishneh Torah on the subject of angels, where he displays a lively interest in angelology. These angels are not mere impersonal physical forces. These angels are intelligent beings. Here is the relevant material from M.T. *Ysodai HaTorah* 2:3-8 (translation is by Moses Hyamson, 1976, Feldheim):

- “3. All that the Holy God blessed be He, created in His universe falls into three divisions.... (Thirdly,) are creatures that consist of form without substance (*tsura b'lo golem*). These are the angels. For the angels are not material bodies, but only forms distinguished from each other.
4. What then is meant when the prophets say that they saw an angel of fire, possessing wings? Such descriptions are to be understood as prophetic visions and are to be taken in an allegorical sense. They are meant to indicate that the angel is not corporeal and has no gravity like bodies that have weight. Thus too, it is said, “For the Lord, thy God, is a devouring fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24). Yet God is not fire. The expression is a metaphor. Similarly, it is said “He makes his angels winds” (Psalms 104:4).
5. In what way are these forms different from each other, seeing that they are incorporeal? The answer is that, in their essential being, they are not equal. Each of them is below another and exists by the other’s energy, and so, throughout, one angel being above the other. And all exist by the power and goodness of the Holy God, blessed he He. Solomon, in his wisdom, alludes to this in the text, ‘For higher than the high, One watcheth’ (Ecclesiastes 5:7).
6. When we say that one angel is below another, this does not refer to position its space as when we think of an individual who occupies a higher seat than another, but to superiority of rank, as when one says in reference to two scholars, one of whom has more wisdom than the other, that he is the higher in degree, or when one says of the cause that it is higher than the effect.
7. The variety of names that the angels bear has reference to the difference in their rank. They are called *Hayoth Hakodesh*—these are the highest; *Ophanim*, *Erelim*, *Hashmalim*, *Seraphim*, *Malakhim*, *Bene Elokim*, *Cherubim*, and *Ishim*. These ten names, by which the angels are called, correspond to their ten degrees [compare the *sefirot*, and the ten emanative hypostases in Avicenna]. The highest rank, above which there is no degree higher than that of God, blessed be He, is that of the form called *Hayoth (khayot)*. In the prophetic literature, it is therefore said that the *Hayoth* are beneath the Throne of Glory. To the tenth degree, belongs the form of those termed *Ishim*. They are the angels that commune with the prophets and appear to them in the prophetic vision. They are called *Ishim* (individuals, men), because their rank approximates to that of the intelligence of human beings.
8. All these forms live, realize the Creator, and possess a knowledge of Him that is exceedingly great—a knowledge corresponding with the rank of each but having no relation to the infinite greatness of the Creator. Even the highest class of angels, cannot attain to a knowledge of the truth concerning God as He really is. For this, their capacities are insufficient. But the highest angelic form apprehends and knows more than the one below it; and so on, through all the degrees down to the tenth. This, too, knows God with knowledge, to the like of which, human beings, consisting of matter as well as form, cannot attain, but none of them knows the Creator as He knows himself.”

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER 1:49

The angels are incorporeal beings. God creates them. By saying this, Maimonides opposes the Aristotelian concept that incorporeal beings are uncreated.

The angels are the “separate intellects” (*s'khalim nivdalim*): those minds that cause the spheres to rotate eternally. In addition, any incorporeal force or entity apart from God is an angel. We will see that this includes unformed hylic matter, figured in the books of prophecy by female angels. On the other hand, forces *in* physical bodies are not angels (but see Guide 2:6, specifically about forces in wombs).

The changeability of shape revealed by the angels in the prophetic writings means that they have no shape outside of the prophetic imagination. They could not, because they are “separate intellects,” meaning that they are separate from any shape, shape being a property of matter. The forms of angels glimpsed in prophecy are imagined forms: images, not reality. When the Bible mentions an angel, we can be sure that prophecy took place, and that the vision in the prophet’s imagination persists throughout that specific biblical account.

The prophets wrote using imaginative corporeal metaphors, because men cannot accept the reality of the incorporeal without serious training. Even-Shmuel suggests that people find it difficult to perceive ideas abstracted from form since we require everything to be located in time and place. For the most part, our imagination rules, to the exclusion of intellect. This imagination is a false, reified representation of reality. Imagination governs even most intellectuals (*hem rov ha-maynim*). The intellectuals believed that anything imagined was real and that which is unimaginable cannot be real. This is contrary to the truth, for though the incorporeal is unimaginable, it is real. Here Maimonides’ critique aims at the anti-scientific theology of the Muslim Kalām (for more on them see 1:71-76) and their Jewish followers. They rejected the veracity of sense data or nature, presaging Berkeley and Hume.

“Wings” and their Rules. Prophets imaginatively ascribe to incorporeal beings those natural powers men take as perfections. Thus, they grant God the attribute of sight, which men consider a perfection. There is one difference between metaphoric descriptions of God and of the angels. The Bible only ascribes to God attributes appropriate to men, including the very form of man, but never attributes of animals. Therefore, to distinguish between God and angels, prophets describe angels as “winged,” an attribute of birds, not of men. They also describe them as “flying,” for the same reason. Maimonides asserts that they would never apply “winged” or “flying” to God. On the other hand, they do not apply any other animal characteristics to the angels.

Efodi clarifies an ambiguity in these rules by explaining that when Maimonides said that flight does not occur without wings, he means that we never see flight without wings in nature, not that wingless flight never occurs in the Bible, for it does (Psalms 18:11, Zechariah 5:1, Isaiah 60:8).

Kheruvim and Khayot. Maimonides proceeds to distinguish misleading cases that might seem to be exceptions to these rules. Most of these exceptions have to do with cherubs and *khayot*. Although he applies these two terms to levels of angels in Mishneh Torah, Ysodai HaTorah 2:7, in the Guide he applies other meanings to these words. God’s “riding” the cherub (Psalms 18:11) does not mean He is flying but that the cherub flies and God is superior to it. As we will see, the cherub that God “rides” is just a metaphor for the relationship of God with the soul of the outer sphere of the cosmos, described in 1:70 by the phrase “riding on the *aravot*,” *rokhev ba’aravot* (bearing in mind the important fact that *rokhev* is an anagram of *kherub*—cherub. See my essay in 1:12 “On the Interpretation of Dreams” explaining Maimonidean anagrams).

The *khayot* (“the Living Creatures” in Ezekiel’s vision), on the other hand, have feet and faces, as well as wings. Some of these are animal faces, which would violate Maimonides’ rule against animal ascriptions other than

“wings,” e.g., ascription of the face of a lion, an ox, or an eagle. Maimonides responds that these faces did not really represent animal faces, but that sometimes men’s faces resemble animal faces (Guide 3:1). Moreover, he suggests a distinction between *khayot* and angels, taking them out of the rule. While they seem to be of the ten levels of angels in Mishneh Torah, he also says of them there that they are exalted over all other angels, implying that they are a different species or genus than the angelic host.

In Guide 3:1-2, Maimonides explains that the “faces” of the *hayot* express their dual nature, representing the harmony between the four divisions of the cosmos and the four ages of man. Its “feet” express the causative power of the spheres (on “foot” as cause 1:28, and my essay there).

There is a major exception to these “wing” rules, which Maimonides himself mentioned in Guide 1:43, the parallel chapter to ours. We learned there that one of the meanings of the lexical term “wing” was “to conceal.” We also saw that he delights in concealing this meaning, as he does here. In that chapter we discussed the passage cited, “...under Whose *wings* thou art come to trust,” from Ruth 2:12. This passage seems to violate his rule against attaching animal symbols to God. Recall that in 1:43 he also cited Ruth 3:9, “spread therefore thy *skirt* (wing) over thine handmaid,” which *conceals* a sexual reference about the *uncovering* of Boaz’ *feet*. See my more extensive discussion there. The point is that when the Bible ascribes “wing” to God it always means concealment. Indeed, *kanaf*, in these instances, is a metaphorical extension from “garment” and not “wing.” Guide 1:43 calls *kanaf* a homonym, and gave “garment” or “corner of a garment” as the homonymous alternatives to the ornithological appendage. Therefore, the ascription to God is really a concealing “garment” and not an animal “wing.”

Nevertheless, Shem Tov interjects that since, according to Maimonides, God himself does not move the outer sphere but only inspires the soul of the sphere to move the sphere, we therefore should never ascribe animal motion to God.

Angelic Flight. “Wing,” symbolizes *flight*, itself a metaphor for the unmediated immediate accomplishment of an act. Flight is the specific metaphor for angelic perfection for the following reasons:

1. Birds fly back and forth, appearing and disappearing in the blink of an eye. This should remind us that prophecy comes to non-Mosaic prophets intermittently at best, like lightning or its reflection in the glow of amber (See Introduction to the Guide).
2. Men envy the birds their flight in a way they do not envy other animals, because they wish they too could fly from danger or fly to their desires. This makes flight a perfection in men’s eyes, and so they attribute flight to the angels, to show that the angels are perfect beings.
3. Birds fly with great velocity, just as angels accomplish tasks immediately, at the velocity of thought.
4. Flight implies motion, and motion implies life. Thus, the angel’s “wings” mean that the angels are not merely impersonal forces but living beings.
5. Their wings *cause* their flight, and thus the number of their wings expresses the number of causes in the Aristotelian system. Ezekiel’s angels have four wings (Ezek.1:6) for the four causes: the formal, material, proximate and final causes. Thus, the angels are causes, and their *fourness* suggests the basic *fourness* of the universe (four humors, winds, elements, cosmological levels, etc.). They especially suggest the four causes of the motion of the spheres: their spherical shapes, their souls, their minds and their desire for God (Guide 2:10, which discusses Maimonides’ notion of *fourness*).

See the beginning of my treatment of Guide 1:43 for an extensive explanation of angels. See also the end of 1:15 for my essay, “What is the Subject of Jacob’s Ladder” for its discussion of a letter attributed to Maimonides. The author of that letter, probably Joseph Ibn Aknin, explained how Maimonides could say in one place that an angel could be a prophet, and in another that an angel could be one of the four physical elements. He did this by showing the harmonic concordance between the levels of prophecy and the levels of the elements, their effects on the four humors, etc., expressing their *dual nature*.

ANGELS IN THE MIDRASH

“[‘Gen. 3:24: *So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east (mi’kedem) of the Garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.*’] *Mi’kedem* (from the east, i.e., of Eden), teaches that the angels were created before (*kodem*) the Garden of Eden as it is written, ‘This is the living creature (*ha-khaya*) that I saw under the God of Israel by the river Chebar [an anagram of cherub]; and I knew that they were *cherubim*’ (Ezekiel 10:20). ‘And a flaming sword’ (the angels are so called) in accordance with the verse ‘His ministers are as flaming fire’ (Psalm 104:4). ‘Which turns every way’: they (the angels) change [turn about]: sometimes they appear as men, sometimes as women, sometimes as spirits, sometimes as angels.” (Midrash *Genesis Rabba*, 21:9)

To illustrate the point that the prophets expressed their concept of angels in images, Maimonides provides an obscure Midrash, and then an even more obscure passage from the prophet Zechariah.

The Midrash says that the prophets imagined the angels sometimes as spirits (*rukhot*-also means winds), sometimes as men and sometimes as women. “Spirits,” suggest both the four winds and the four elements, one of which is wind or air. The passage quoted from Psalms connects angels not only to the element of fire but also elemental air, “Who maketh his *angels spirits (malakhav rukhot)*; his *ministers (m’shartav)* a flaming fire,” and proceeds in the next two verses to mention the remaining elements of earth and water.

Rukhot also calls to mind the *ruakh hakodesh* (“holy spirit”), which is the name for the basic level of prophetic inspiration. There is, thus, a link between the physical/cosmological meaning (elements) and the prophetic meaning (inspiration) of “spirits.” This *dual nature* exists in each aspect of the metaphors for angels. Angels also represent the mechanism of prophetic inspiration: see Guide 2:10, where the angel is the seer’s imagination and the cherub is his intellect.

When the Midrash says that the angels “sometimes appear as men,” it refers to the three “men” who visited Abraham in his tent (Genesis 18:2). Maimonides understands this passage to mean that (with few exceptions) when we meet an angel in a chapter of the Bible, even if the angel is not called an angel, the entire section occurs in a prophetic dream or trance.

We treat below the Midrash’s statement that sometimes the angels appear as women. It is Maimonides’ central concern in our chapter.

An interesting feature of this Midrash is the part that Maimonides does not quote (the quoted part, as usual, is in greyscale above). The Midrash says that the angel placed to the east of Eden with the flaming sword existed “before Eden” (*kedem* = east, before). This suggests one of the major problems of the *Maaseh Bereshit*: When were the angels created? The question comes down to whether they were created at all or whether they are eternal. For Aristotle, the “separate intelligences” are eternal and uncreated. Maimonides will argue that God created the angels before Eden, but not before the creation of the universe.

What are the angels? The Midrash (*Genesis Rabba* 8:4, 8:8), the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 38b) and, later, the Guide all focus on the statement of God: “Let us create man” and ask who the “us” referred to are? They are the angels.

The Midrash supposes God to be in consultation with the angels in the creation of man, just as any good architect consults others, but ultimately chooses his own way, even over their opposition. Still, “Let *us* create man” seems to open the door to polytheism. The Midrash actually imagines a discussion with Moses about the writing of “Let us create man.” The Midrash raises the possibility of misinterpretation, that is, that some might think there were *other gods* involved in the creation of man, and, worse, in the creation of the universe. In the Midrash, Moses responds dismissively that “whoever wishes to err may err.” By this, he means that we understand the passage refers to *created* angels, not to gods. The point is that the tradition was aware of the polytheistic threat of an angelic host of servants, but understood that a supernal God uses immanent incorporeal powers to effect His will in the corporeal universe.

ZECHARIAH’S FEMALE ANGELS

Still, to articulate this concept requires imagination and the prophets were “bold” in their use of imagery (Guide 1:46). This shocking boldness sometimes seems like prurience. Maimonides seizes on the statement from this Midrash that the angels “appear as women” to illustrate just how bold they were.

Since women were thought to be weaker than men, why would the prophet, seeking to portray the angels in metaphors of human *perfection*, choose the image of woman?

The occasion for the image is a passage in Zechariah. Zechariah is one of the last three prophets prior to the close of prophecy, and just because he represents the waning of prophecy, his visions are more floridly imaginative than those of his predecessors. While this makes him inferior to Isaiah in Maimonides’ eyes, his openness allows us to go “under the hood” of prophecy to see the works. Here is the Zechariah material, in full, 5:1-11. I also include the first sentence of Zechariah’s next chapter, 6:1, which is critical to the rest of the argument, but which Maimonides conceals here:

“1. And I returned, and I lifted my eyes and saw—and behold!—there was a flying scroll.
2. And he said to me, ‘What do you see?’ and I said, ‘I see a flying scroll, twenty cubits long and ten cubits wide.’ 3. And he said to me; This is the curse that comes forth upon the face of the entire land; for, whoever stole was cleared from such as this, and whoever swore was cleared from such as this. 4. I have brought it forth, says the Lord of Hosts, and it shall come into the house of the thief and into the house of him that swears in My Name falsely. And it shall lodge in the midst of his house and destroy him, and his wood, and his stones. 5. And the angel who was speaking to me came forth, and he said to me, ‘Now lift up your eyes and see what this is that is coming forth.’ 6. And I said, ‘What is it?’ And he said, ‘This is the ephah that is going forth.’ And he said, ‘This is [the punishment of those] whose eye [gazes] over the entire land.’ 7. And behold! A talent of lead was being lifted, and this one woman was sitting in the midst of the ephah. 8. And he said, ‘This is *Wickedness*’ (*zot ha-risha*). And he cast her into the midst of the ephah, and he cast the lead weight into her mouth. 9. And I lifted my eyes, and I saw—and behold!—two women were coming forth with wind in their wings, and they had wings like the wings of the stork. And they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heaven. 10. And I said to the angel who spoke to me, ‘Where are they taking the *ephah*?’ 11. And he said to me, ‘To build a house for it in the land of Shinar, and it will be prepared, and they shall place it there on its base.’”

“6:1. And I returned and lifted my eyes and saw - and behold! - four *chariots* (*markavot*, anagram of cherub) were coming forth from between the two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of brass (*nekhoshet*).”

Here is the traditional rabbinic explanation. The flying scroll (5:1-4) is a “scroll of retribution”: it is both a book of malediction and a book of lamentation. The scroll is the size of the door of the Temple in Jerusalem, from which it goes forth. The curse in the scroll comes upon those who transgressed the commandments of the Torah,

particularly those who swore falsely. Because of the destruction and the exile, the Jews were “cleared from such as this” by the scroll, just as the *Kol Nidre* prayer releases oaths. The scroll is flying because it will settle those released sins upon the wicked nations who made themselves the instrument to inflict exile. The *ephah* (1 bushel in volume—35 liters) is like a bushel basket. It also flies in the air. It “measures” the punishment of those whose eyes gazed over the land to rob and oppress, especially through false measurement, “measure for measure.” The woman in the *ephah* is the angel of wickedness. She rises, but is cast back in the *ephah*. A talent of lead (56 lbs.) seals her in the *ephah* to weigh her down so that the poor and needy will no longer be robbed. The other two female angels, helpers of Wickedness, are the national angels of Babylon and Chaldea. They fly down upon the *ephah* and save the angel of wickedness by carrying her to Babylon, where she will feel at home. The next vision, in 6:1, concerns a team of four divine chariots sent to visit punishment on the enemies of Israel: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. The mountains of brass represent the power of these empires. The whole vision is about the transfer of the punished Jews’ transgression onto the account of their punishers.

The first point is that the tradition was unhappy with the idea of women as angels, and so it interpreted them as Wickedness, or as the national angels of the oppressor nations (angelology includes the concept of national guardian angels).

Mountains of Brass. Our interest is in the very end of the quote above, the reference to “mountains of brass.” Brass is *nekhoshet*, a term that figures in Ezekiel’s Vision of the Chariot (Ezekiel 1:7), the vision of the *Maaseh Merkava*, which is the locus of Jewish esoteric lore on Providence.

David Bakan, in *Maimonides On Prophecy*, connects the term *nekhoshet* with female genitals (p. 220; see also Guide 2:29, Pines trans. 348; Ezekiel 1:7; *nekhoshet* from *nekhushtekh*, Ezekiel 16:36— “...because thy [the harlot’s] filthiness [*nekhushtekh*] was poured out and thy nakedness uncovered through thy whoredoms with thy lovers”).

In Ezekiel’s vision (1:7) the Living Creatures (*khayot*) are as “brilliant as a fountain of burnished brass,” *nekhoshet kalal*. Maimonides links up these two passages from Ezekiel and Zechariah as examples of the way the prophetic imagination works (Guide 2:29, Pines trans. p. 348):

“With regard to the same principle, in reference to the *Merkava* there occurs the word *hashmal*, as they have explained, and also *regel egel* [calf foot, and we know what “foot” stands for], and *nekhoshet kalal* [all from Ezek. 1:4-7]. The same applies to other words. In a similar way, Zechariah says (6:1): ‘and the mountains were mountains of *nekhoshet*.’” [*Hashmal* is modernly the term for “lightning,” but Maimonides probably took it as a phallic reference: see the two mentions of the boy who spontaneously combusted contemplating *hashmal*, Talmud *Hagigah*, second chapter]

While Maimonides will never come out and explain these esotericisms because of the rule against public teaching of Jewish esoterics in *Hagigah*, he has strewn enough clues for Bakan to make his very plausible case about their meaning. Especially since Maimonides uses a slight excuse to bring the associated Zechariah material into our chapter on the angels. After having argued that “wing” is only predicated of angels but never of God, and that we ascribe to him only wings and no other animal parts, he explains some exceptions, all of which come from Ezekiel’s Vision: “cherub,” faces of “ox,” “lion,” “eagle,” and the “sole of the calf’s foot.” He says of all of these that he will explain them later: “by means of hints, as far as is necessary, to awake your attention to their true nature.” For his interest in “wings” is just an excuse to provoke interest in the Vision of Ezekiel. Still, the public explanation of that vision is precisely what *Hagigah* forbids. That is why the student must learn to sublimate these images before he can contemplate the metaphor of the mountains of brass.

Sublimation. Bakan explains that the adept must apply the “principle of Rabbi Akiva.” He explains (*op. cit.* pp 31-33) that this means he must recognize the sexual imagery in Scripture and *sublimate* it as metaphorical. Bakan learns this principle from *Hagigah*:

“One passage says: ‘His *throne* was fiery flames’; and another passage says: ‘Till *thrones* were placed’ [both singular and plural in the same verse from Daniel 7:9], and ‘One that was ancient of days did sit!’ [same verse] — There is no contradiction: one [throne] for Him, and one for [his] *beloved* [*dod*], this is the view of R. Akiba. Said R. Jose the Galilean to him: Akiba, how long wilt thou treat the Divine Presence as profane! Rather, [he replied, it must mean] one for justice and one for grace.” (Talmud, *Hagigah* 14a)

Thus, Akiva sublimates the uncomfortable reference to the *Shekhina* as God’s beloved female throne-mate. He removes its prurient suggestiveness by making “thrones” refer to the qualities (hypostases/*sefirot*) of “justice” and “grace.”

Here is what Maimonides wants *us* to sublimate in his cryptic references to *nekhoshet*. Providence is the word we use for God’s continual mysterious intervention in life, emanating form into new creations. We have no words to understand this process of creation but the image of human procreation, though it is *only* an image. The prophets were bold to imagine this as the sexual union of God and His Presence, the *Shekhina*, the eternal female principle. We must conceal this metaphor at all costs until the student can apply Rabbi Akiva’s principle to the text. The student’s sublimation is prerequisite to the recovery of the true meaning behind the imaginative text, because the image is not the reality.

Nekhoshet is one of the words that Maimonides wants us to reinterpret anagrammatically. The word can produce *nakhash* (snake, as in the snake in Eden), *shakhata* (corruption, i.e., what happens to matter), and, perhaps, as female genitalia (*nekhushstekh*). All of these turn us back to the thought that matter is subject successively to privation of form and impression of form, and remind us that Maimonides compared matter to the married harlot of Proverbs, chapter 7 (see Introduction to the Guide). Maimonides also considers matter the source of wickedness (Guide 3:8). On the other hand, matter is necessary for the creation of the universe.

Guide 3:22 returns to Zechariah, chapter 6, in the famous passage where Maimonides claims his own episode of *ruakh hakodesh* inspiration. Comparing Zechariah’s statement in 6:5 about four winds of heaven (which the angel tells him are the same as the four chariots) with statements from Job about Satan, Maimonides contrasts the permanence of cosmological fourness to the impermanence of “Satanic” matter. Knowing what we now know, we understand that this “Satanic” impermanency, contrasted against the permanent forms, is the *nekhoshet* of Zechariah 6:1, while the four winds are the four *markavot*/chariots. The four chariots are the permanent forms that go into and come out of the mountains of ever-changing *nekhoshet*/matter. Moreover, this ever-changing matter is the angel of wickedness whose mouth is crammed with lead, the heaviest common matter, suggesting the deadweight of the earth element.

Taken by itself without the admixture of form, matter is pure potential. This *potentia* is solely a conceptual entity, and, so, like all purely intellectual entities below God, it is an angel. As form emanates onto matter, matter becomes the means of creation and vehicle for its providential continuance. That is why she sits nearest God.

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