

Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed II:42

We have already shown that the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream; it makes no difference whether this is expressly stated or not, as we have explained above. This is a point of considerable importance. In some cases the account begins by stating that the prophet saw an angel; in others, the account apparently introduces a human being, who ultimately is shown to be an angel; but it makes no difference, for if the fact that an angel has been heard is only mentioned at the end, you may rest satisfied that the whole account from the beginning describes a prophetic vision. In such visions, a prophet either sees God who speaks to him, as will be explained by us, or he sees an angel who speaks to him, or he hears someone speaking to him without seeing the speaker, or he sees a man who speaks to him, and learns afterwards that the speaker was an angel. In this latter kind of prophecies, the prophet relates that he saw a man who was doing or saying something, and that he learnt afterwards that it was an angel.

This important principle was adopted by one of our Sages, one of the most distinguished among them, R. Hiya the Great (Bereshit Rabba, xlvi.), in the exposition of the Scriptural passage commencing, "And the Lord appeared unto him in the plain of Mamre" (Gen. xviii.). The general statement that the Lord appeared to Abraham is followed by the description in what manner that appearance of the Lord took place; namely, Abraham saw first three men; he ran and spoke to them. R. Hiya, the author of the explanation, holds that the words of Abraham, "My Lord, if now I have found grace in thy sight, do not, I pray thee, pass from thy servant," were spoken by him in a prophetic vision to one of the men; for he says that Abraham addressed these words to the chief of these men. Note this well, for it is one of the great mysteries [of the Law]. The same, I hold, is the case when it is said in reference to Jacob, "And a man wrestled with him" (Gen. xxxii. 25); this took place in a prophetic vision, since it is expressly stated in the end (ver. 31) that it was an angel. The circumstances are here exactly the same as those in the vision of Abraham, where the general statement, "And the Lord appeared to him," etc., is followed by a detailed description. Similarly the account of the vision of Jacob begins, "And the angels of God met him" (Gen. xxxii. 2); then follows a detailed description how it came to pass that they met him; namely, Jacob sent messengers, and after having prepared and done certain things, "he was left alone," etc., "and a man wrestled with him" (ibid. ver. 24). By this term "man" [one of] the angels of God is meant, mentioned in the phrase, "And angels of God met him"; the wrestling and speaking was entirely a prophetic vision. That which happened to Balaam on the way, and the speaking of the ass, took place in a prophetic vision, since further on, in the same account, an angel of God is introduced as speaking to Balaam. I also think that what Joshua perceived, when "he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold a man stood before him" (Josh. v. 13) was a prophetic vision, since it is stated afterwards (ver. 14) that it was "the prince of the host of the Lord." But in the passages, "And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal" (Judges ii. 1); "And it came to pass that the angel of the Lord spake these words to all Israel" (ibid. ver. 2); the "angel" is, according to the explanation of our Sages, Phineas. They say, The angel is Phineas, for, when the Divine Glory rested upon him, he was "like an angel." We have already shown (chap. vi.) that the term "angel" is homonymous, and denotes also "prophet," as is the case in the following passages:--"And He sent an angel, and He hath brought us up out of Egypt" (Num. xx. 16); "Then spake Haggai, the angel of the Lord, in the Lords message" (Hagg. i. 13); "But they mocked the angels of God" (2 Chron. xxxvi. 16). Comp. also the words of Daniel, "And the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation" (Dan. ix. 11).

All this passed in a prophetic vision. Do not imagine that an angel is seen or his word heard otherwise than in a prophetic vision or prophetic dream, according to the principle laid down:--"I make myself known unto him in a vision, and speak unto him in a dream" (Num. xii. 6). The instances quoted may serve as an illustration of those passages which I do not mention. 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. This is the principal method by which most of the difficult passages in the Bible can be explained. Consider the words, "And an angel of the Lord found her by the well of water" (Gen. xvi. 7), which are similar to the words referring to Joseph--"And a man found him, and behold, he was erring in the field" (ibid. xxxvii. 15). All the Midrashim assume that by man in this passage an angel is meant.

	Rashi	Maimonides	Nachmanides
And He appeared:	God's Presence (Visit)	Vision of God (Prophecy)	God's Presence (Not for prophecy but to honor and/or to heal)
Three men:	Real Angels	Imagined Men	Real Angels (but "vested" as men)
Eating:	In Appearance	Real (within the imagined state)	In Appearance (the food disappeared)