

Angels at the Tent-Flap:

Two Perspectives on Avraham's Hospitality and Textuality

(א) וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרָא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל בְּחַם הַיּוֹם:

וּרְאָ אֵלָיו י"י - היאך? שבאו אליו שלשה אנשים שהיו מלאכים. שבהרבה מקומות כשנראה המלאך קורוהו בלשון שכינה כדכת' כי שמי בקרבו, שלוחו כמותו. וכן וירא אליו מלאך י"י בלבת אש מתוך הסנה, וכתו' שם וירא י"י כי סר לראות: כחום היום - מה צורך לכתוב כחום היום? אלא להודיעך כי בלוט כת' ויבאו [שני] המלאכים סדמה בערב, ולכך אמר להם לוט סורו נא אל בית עבדכם ולינו, אבל אברהם לפי שבאו אליו כחום היום בבקר שאין דרך אורחים ללון אלא לאכול ולעבור, לפיכך לא אמר להם אברהם ללון אלא וסעדו לבכם ואחר תעבורו

Rashbam: the appearance of the "angels" was the form in which the great vision took place

(ב) וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְעִים עִלָּיו וַיֵּרָא וַיִּמְדָּם לִקְרָאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִסְנָא מִצְּאֵתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶלְנָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ: (ד) וַיִּקְחֵנָּא מֵעֲטֹמִים וְרִחְצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁעֵנּוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ: (ה) וַאֲקֹחָה פֶּתַח לֶחֶם וְסַעְדוּ לְבַכְסֵם אַחַר תַּעֲבֹרוּ מִיְּעַלְכֶן עִבְרַתְּם עַל־עַבְדְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ בֵּן תַּעֲשֶׂה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ: (ו) וַיִּמְהַר אַבְרָהָם הָאֹהֶל אֶל־שְׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִהֲיִי שְׁלֹשׁ סָאִים קָמַח סֶלֶת לֹשִׁי וְעֵשִׂי עֲגוֹת: (ז) וְאֶל־הַבָּקָר רָץ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח בְּדָבָרָךְ רֶךְ וְטוֹב וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הַזֶּעֶר וַיִּמְהַר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתוֹ: (ח) וַיִּקַּח חֲמָאָה וְחֶלֶב וּבְדָבָרָךְ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן לַפְּנִימָה וְהוּא־עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַת הָעֵץ וַיֹּאבְלוּ: (ט) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אִיֵּה שְׂרָה אֲשֶׁרְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֹהֶל: (י) וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כַּעַת חַיָּה וְהִנֵּה־בֵּן לְשְׂרָה אֲשֶׁרְךָ וְשְׂרָה שָׂמְעַת פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו: (יא) וְאַבְרָהָם וְשְׂרָה זְקֵנִים בְּאַיִם בְּיָמֵם חֹדֶל לְהֵיוֹת לְשְׂרָה אֵרֶת כְּנָשִׁים: (יב) וַתַּעֲזֹק שְׂרָה בְּקַרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הִיִּתְהַלְלִי עֲדָנָה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן: (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' (המלאך. גדול שבהם) אֶל־אַבְרָהָם לְמַדָּה זֶה עָזָקָה שְׂרָה לְאִמְךָ הֲאִם אֲמַנְסָם אֵלַי וְאֲנִי זְקֵנָתִי: (יד) הֲיִפְלֵא מִה' דָּבָר לְמוֹעֵד אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כַּעַת חַיָּה וְלִשְׂרָה בֵּן:

הִפְלֵא מ"י - ששלחנו אליך דבר? וכן וי"י המטיר על סדום גפרית ואש מאת י"י מן השמים, הראשון שבפסוק הוא גבריאל והשני שבפסוק הוא הק'. וכן הוא מפורש בספר הגדה:

Rashbam: the speakers (angels) are referring to 'ה' in both the third and first person

(טו) וַתִּכְהַשׁ שְׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא עָזָקְתִּי בִּי יְרָאָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא בִּי עָזָקְתָּ: (טז) וַיִּקְמוּ מִשֵּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁקְפוּ עַל־פְּנֵי סָדָם וְאַבְרָהָם הֵלֵךְ עִמָּם לְשֹׁלְחָם: וַיִּקְמוּ מִשֵּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים - שנים מהם הלכו לסדום כדכת' ויבאו שני המלאכים סדומה, וגדול שבהם היה מדבר עם אברהם. וזהו שכת' בו וי"י אמר המכסה אני וגו', [וכן] ואברהם עודנו עומד לפני י"י. שני פסוקים אלו מדברים בשלישי:

Rashbam: the two of them went to Sodom, while the third stayed and spoke with Avraham

(יז) וְה' אָמַר הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה:

המכסה אני מאברהם - מה שאני רוצה להפוך את סדום? ואני יודע שבני ישמרו דרך י"י ויזכו להביא עליהם את אשר דיבר לאברהם לתת להם ארץ כנען ואילו העיירות מנחלת בניו הם כדכת' בגבול כנען ב' נח ויהי גבול הכנעני מצידון באכה גרה עד עזה באכה סדומה [ועמרה] אדמה וצבויים עד לשע. ואיך אחריב קרקע שלו או קרקע שכיניו שלא מדעתו:

Rashbam: am I going to hide from Avraham what I intend to do to Sodom? These cities are in the Land that I gave to his seed...

(יח) וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהִי־לְגוֹ גְדוֹל וְעֵצוֹם וְנִבְרָכְרָבוּ כָּל־גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: (יט) כִּי יִדְעֹתָיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא־הוּא אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשִׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיא ה' עַל־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּר עִלָּיו: (כ) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' זַעֲקַת סָדָם וְעִמְרָה כִּי־רַבָּה מְאֹד: וַיֹּאמֶר י"י - המלאך לאברהם, שלוחים הללו אני שולח בשביל זעקת סדום, כמו שאמר למעלה ואנשי סדום רעים וחטאים:

Rashbam: "God spoke..." this is the angel speaking to Avraham, that "I am sending thse agent due to the cries from Sodom"

(כא) אֲרִדְהָנָא וְאִרְאָה הַכְּעֻקָּתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ בְלָה וְאִסְלָא אֲדַעָה: (כב) וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשֵּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סָדָמָה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדְנוּ עֹמְדֵי לִפְנֵי ה': (כג) וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאִם תִּסְפָּה צְדִיק עִסְדָּשֶׁע: (כד) אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הֲאִם תִּסְפָּה וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא לְמַקּוֹם לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְּדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּה: (כה) חֲלָלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂתוֹ בְּדָבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִסְדָּשֶׁע וְהִיא כְּצִדִיק פְּרִשְׁעָה חֲלָלָה לְךָ הַשֹּׁפֵט בְּלִי־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט: (כו) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִסְדָּמְצָא בְּסֹדָם חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנִשְׂאֵתִי לְכָל־הַמָּקוֹם בְּעַבְרוֹם: וַיֹּאמֶר ד' - המלאך, [וכן] עומד לפני י"י, לפני המלאך לבקש פניו:

(כז) וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא הֹאֲלֵתִי לְדָבָר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי וְאֲנִי עֹפֵר וְאֶפְרָ: (כח) אוֹלֵי יִחְסְרוּן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְּדִיקִים חֲמִשָּׁה הַתְּשֻׁחִית בְּחַמְשָׁה אֶת־כָּל־הָעִיר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית אִסְדָּמְצָא שֵׁם אֲרִבְעִים וְחַמְשָׁה: (כט) וַיִּסְפֵּף עוֹד לְדָבָר אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שֵׁם אֲרִבְעִים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אַעֲשֶׂה בְּעַבְרוֹ דְאֲרִבְעִים: (ל) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא יַחַד לְאֲדֹנָי וְאֲדַבְּרָה אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שֵׁם שְׁלֹשִׁים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אַעֲשֶׂה אִם־ אֲמַצָּא שֵׁם שְׁלֹשִׁים: (לא) וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא הֹאֲלֵתִי לְדָבָר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שֵׁם עֶשְׂרִים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית בְּעַבְרוֹ הָעֶשְׂרִים: (לב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא יַחַד לְאֲדֹנָי וְאֲדַבְּרָה אֶת־הַפְּעִם אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שֵׁם עֶשְׂרֵה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית בְּעַבְרוֹ הָעֶשְׂרֵה: (לג) וַיִּלֶּךְ ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר בְּלָה לְדָבָר אֶל־אַבְרָהָם וְאַבְרָהָם שָׁב לְמַקְוֹ:

1 And Hashem appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; 2 and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed down to the earth, 3 and said: 'My lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant. 4 Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree. 5 And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and stay ye your heart; after that ye shall pass on; forasmuch as ye are come to your servant.' And they said: 'So do, as thou hast said.' 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said: 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes.' 7 And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it unto the servant; and he hastened to dress it. 8 And he took curd, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. 9 And they said unto him: 'Where is Sarah thy wife?' And he said: 'Behold, in the tent.' 10 And He said: 'I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.' And Sarah heard in the tent door, which was behind him.-- 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, and well stricken in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.-- 12 And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: 'After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' 13 And Hashem said unto Abraham: 'Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I of a surety bear a child, who am old? 14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD. At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh round, and Sarah shall have a son.' 15 Then Sarah denied, saying: 'I laughed not'; for she was afraid. And He said: 'Nay; but thou didst laugh.' 16 And the men rose up from thence, and looked out toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. 17 And Hashem said: 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing; 18 seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that Hashem may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him.' 20 And Hashem said: 'Verily, the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and, verily, their sin is exceeding grievous. 21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know.' 22 And the men turned from thence, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham stood yet before the LORD. 23 And Abraham drew near, and said: 'Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Peradventure there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? 25 That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from Thee; shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?' 26 And Hashem said: 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will forgive all the place for their sake.' 27 And Abraham answered and said: 'Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD, who am but dust and ashes. 28 Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous; wilt Thou destroy all the city for lack of five?' And He said: 'I will not destroy it, if I find there forty and five.' 29 And he spoke unto Him yet again, and said: 'Peradventure there shall be forty found there.' And He said: 'I will not do it for the forty's sake.' 30 And he said: 'Oh, let not Hashem be angry, and I will speak. Peradventure there shall thirty be found there.' And He said: 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' 31 And he said: 'Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD. Peradventure there shall be twenty found there.' And He said: 'I will not destroy it for the twenty's sake.' 32 And he said: 'Oh, let not Hashem be angry, and I will speak yet but this once. Peradventure ten shall be found there.' And He said: 'I will not destroy it for the ten's sake.' 33 And Hashem went His way, as soon as He had left off speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned unto his place.

Guide to 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. Hīya 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. Hīya, 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 Lord's 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 homonymy 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.

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WE do not reject the Eternity of the Universe, because certain passages in Scripture confirm the Creation; for such passages are not more numerous than those in which God is represented as a corporeal being; nor is it impossible or difficult to find for them a suitable interpretation. We might have explained them in the same manner as we did in respect to the Incorporeality of God. We should perhaps have had an easier task in showing that the Scriptural passages referred to are in harmony with the theory of the Eternity of the Universe if we accepted the latter, than we had in explaining the anthropomorphisms in the Bible when we rejected the idea that God is corporeal. For two reasons, however, we have not done so, and have not accepted the Eternity of the Universe. First, the Incorporeality of God has been demonstrated by proof: those passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise. But the Eternity of the Universe has not been proved; a mere argument in favor of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text, and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument.

Secondly, our belief in the Incorporeality of God is not contrary to any of the fundamental principles of our religion: it is not contrary to the words of any prophet. Only ignorant people believe that it is contrary to the teaching of Scripture: but we have shown that this is not the case: on the contrary, Scripture teaches the Incorporeality of God. If we were to accept the Eternity of the Universe as taught by Aristotle, that everything in the Universe is the result of fixed laws, that Nature does not change, and that there is nothing supernatural, we should necessarily be in opposition to the foundation of our religion, we should disbelieve all miracles and signs, and certainly reject all hopes and fears derived from Scripture, unless the miracles are also explained figuratively. The Allegorists amongst the Mohammedans have done this and have thereby arrived at absurd conclusions. If, however, we accepted the Eternity of the Universe in accordance with the second of the theories which we have expounded above (ch. xxiii.), and assumed, with Plato, that the heavens are likewise transient, we should not be in opposition to the fundamental principles of our religion; this theory would not imply the rejection of miracles, but, on the contrary, would admit them as possible. The Scriptural text might have been explained accordingly, and many expressions might have been found in the Bible and in other writings that would confirm and support this theory. But there is no necessity for this expedient, so long as the theory has not been proved. As there is no proof sufficient to convince us, this theory need not be taken into consideration, nor the other one; we take the text of the Bible literally and say that it teaches us a truth which we cannot prove; and the miracles are evidence for the correctness of our view.

Accepting the Creation, we find that miracles are possible, that Revelation is possible, and that every difficulty in this question is removed. We might be asked, Why has God inspired a certain person and not another? Why has He revealed the Law to one particular nation, and at one particular time? why has He commanded this, and forbidden that? why has He shown through a prophet certain particular miracles? what is the object of these laws? and Why has He not made the commandments and the prohibitions part of our nature, if it was His object that we should live in accordance with them? We answer to all these questions: He willed it so; or, His wisdom decided so. Just as He created the world according to His will, at a certain time, in a certain form, and as we do not understand why His will or His wisdom decided upon that peculiar form, and upon that peculiar time, so we do not know why His will or wisdom determined any of the things mentioned in the preceding questions. But if we assume that the Universe has the present form as the result of fixed laws, there is occasion for the above questions; and these could only be answered in an objectionable way, implying denial and rejection of the Biblical texts, the correctness of which no intelligent person doubts. Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe; and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it.