

the Indians in the book they called *Kalila wa-Dimna* . . . spoke in fables in the form of discussions between animals and birds and . . . decorate[d] it with illustrations so that the masses would run and savor its wisdom and take pleasure in it until their intellect strengthens and would examine and find the insights and wisdom bound within.<sup>57</sup>

But Maimonides never identifies literary beauty alone as a sufficient reason for employing a *mashal*. Only once the *mashal* form is required for other reasons—to conceal or elucidate—may some details be added to enhance the *zāhir* aesthetically.

#### 4.1.4 Prophecy: The Psychological Function of Mashal

Maimonides could draw upon Jewish tradition for the political and pedagogical functions of the *mashal* genre, but Arabic learning exclusively enabled him to devise a novel Jewish approach to the role of *mashal* in prophecy. To begin with, he deemed *mashal* an integral component of prophecy, as he comments in the *Guide*: “we have already explained in our compilations that prophets frequently<sup>58</sup> prophesy using *meshalim*” (II:43:391). By itself, this observation is not unique in Jewish tradition and can be explained using the pedagogical theory Sa’adia gave for Proverbs, as Moses Ibn Ezra, for example, does.<sup>59</sup>

The pedagogical theory explains why the prophets would find *meshalim* useful in persuading their audiences. But in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:3 (above, p. 120), the passage he evidently refers to in the above cited comment in the *Guide*, Maimonides boldly claims that the *mashal* format is a requirement of prophecy since all prophets

<sup>57</sup> Song of Songs comm., Halkin ed., 2–5; English trans. in Halkin 1950:407; see also Talmage 1986:323; Cohen 1995/6:19.

<sup>58</sup> Ar. קִי הַנְּבִיאִים. Pines’ translation, “sometimes prophesy,” which echoes Ibn Tibbon’s פְּעֻמִּים מִנְּבִיאִים, is misleading given Maimonides’ statements in *MT, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:3 (above, p. 120, to which he evidently refers here) and *Guide* II:47. Although *qad* + imperfect verb usually means “sometimes,” it can also express frequency; see Wright 1967:1:286. Rīḥa renders this passage even more forcefully: כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים מִנְּבִיאִים בְּמִשְׁלִים (*Sefer ha-Zikkaron*, 42 cited below).

<sup>59</sup> See *Kitāb* 148a, where he cites Sa’adia’s observation to explain why “*meshalim* and *hiddot* are many in the writings of the prophets.” Abraham Ibn Ezra likewise comments on Hos 12:11, “I have given [them] similitudes, *meshalim*, in order for you to understand” (see above, p. 85 and Simon 1989:119n). Sa’adia himself never specifically addresses the prophets’ use of *meshalim*, though he may hint at it; see introduction to Isaiah, Ratzaby ed., 102–03.

(except for Moses) could only receive a communication from God in a graphic (i.e., picture) rather than purely verbal form:

In what respect was the prophecy of Moses distinguished from that of the other prophets? . . . All the prophets received their messages through the medium of an angel. Hence, what they saw, they saw as a *mashal* and *hiddah* (riddle).<sup>60</sup> Moses received his message not through an angel . . . that is to say that . . . he realized the prophetic message clearly, without *hiddah* and without *mashal*. (*MT, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 7:6)

Maimonides’ logic in this passage is clarified in the *Guide*, where he reveals that the “angel” is the imaginative faculty.<sup>61</sup> Hence,

the greater part of the prophecies of the prophets proceeds by means of *meshalim* because that is the action of the instrument for [prophecy], I mean the imagination (II:47:407).

This is a new understanding of the prophetic genre in Jewish tradition. Whereas his Jewish predecessors explained the appeal of *meshalim* in terms of the audience’s irragination, Maimonides, drawing here upon al-Fārābī, argues that the prophet himself can receive God’s word only through his own imaginative faculty, which requires dramatization and graphic illustration.<sup>62</sup> This function of *mashal* can be termed “psychological,” rather than political, as S. Rosenberg (1981:108) writes: “the picturesque language is not a literary tactic devised by the prophet, but rather a cognitive medium.” This explains why the prophets employ *meshalim* even when their message is not particularly abstract or complex (requiring a pedagogical *mashal*), nor esoteric (calling for concealment in a *mashal*). Even if the audience could absorb the message by itself, the nature of prophecy requires that it be delivered to the prophet “pre-packaged”<sup>63</sup> in picture form.

According to Maimonides’ “great and important principle” of *mashal* exegesis, a prophetic vision may contain only an essential core message represented by a particular action or symbol, whereas other

<sup>60</sup> This may be a hendiadys (see above, p. 141), just like *mashal u-melisah* (*MT, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:12; see Pagis 1970:55–56).

<sup>61</sup> II:45:403; see Rosenberg 1981:109. Cf. Kasher 1992/3:111, who argues that Maimonides changed his views about this angel.

<sup>62</sup> See Macy 1986. In al-Fārābī’s thought (as in that of Maimonides), this explanation supplements, but does not exclude, the political one. In asserting the crucial role of the imagination in prophecy, al-Fārābī drew upon a lengthy tradition in Greek philosophy; see Strauss 1963:lxix–xc.

<sup>63</sup> An expression used by Klein-Braslav 1987:23.

aspects of the vision lack symbolic meaning. As we saw in literary *meshalim*, this principle opens exegetical possibilities with respect to prophetic *meshalim* that the author of the *Guide* otherwise could not entertain. A prime illustration is his approach to Abraham's encounter with the three angels, two of whom then visit Lot, as depicted in Genesis 18–19. Maimonides maintains axiomatically that angels have no physical form and thus cannot be seen, much less eat or drink. Yet these angels dine with Abraham (18:7) and physically drag Lot's family from Sodom moments before its destruction (19:16). The great philosopher resolves this problem by arguing that this entire episode "occurred" only in a vision granted to Abraham (II:6:265, II:42:389).<sup>64</sup> Having preserved his views on angels by reducing this episode to a *mashal*,<sup>65</sup> Maimonides—here revealing his philosophical rather than exegetical interest—saw no need to elaborate on further interpretive implications of this choice.

But later authors pursued the matter. Presumably, the point of the imaginary visit to Abraham was to inform him about the impending birth of Isaac, which one of the angels states explicitly: "I will return to you next year and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (18:10).<sup>66</sup> But, as the great Catalan talmudist-exegete Nahmanides observes in a sharp critique, many other things occur in the episode that have nothing to do with this message, which are rendered meaningless by Maimonides' analysis:

According to his words, Sarah did not knead cakes, and Abraham did not prepare the calf, nor did Sarah laugh, but everything was [merely] a vision. If so, "the dream came with much business"<sup>67</sup> as a false dream, for what is the purpose of showing him all this? (Comm. on Gen 18:1)

<sup>64</sup> Maimonides' treatment of this episode—and its interpretation in the super-commentaries on the *Guide*—is analyzed fully by Rosenberg 1981:115–19, which is the basis of our discussion here.

<sup>65</sup> Although he applies his principles of *mashal* analysis to this episode and would thus seem to classify it as a *mashal* (see Ritba cited below), Maimonides never explicitly refers to it as such. (In II:42:389, he uses the term *ta'wil* [see chapter one, n. 32], which Pines renders contextually "allegoric interpretation," to describe his analysis of this episode.) For other biblical accounts that Maimonides considered to be *meshalim* but did not classify as such explicitly, see Nuriel 1990.

<sup>66</sup> Lot's rescue may be an additional aspect of Abraham's vision; see below.

<sup>67</sup> ענין ברוב ענין, a reference to Qoh 5:2. "Just as a dream comes with much business, so does foolish utterance come with much speech."

Nahmanides tacitly assumes that historical details—such as the foods Abraham and Sarah prepared—are inherently significant.<sup>68</sup> But if the visit in Genesis 18 occurred only in Abraham's mind, such details are useless and hence out of place in Scripture. The late-thirteenth-century Spanish talmudist Ritba (Yom Tov ben Abraham al-Ishbili), who took it upon himself to defend Maimonides from the critiques of Nahmanides, responds according to the great philosopher's own exegetical principles:

According to the method of the *Moreh*,<sup>69</sup> of blessed memory, this is hardly unusual (lit. new) in prophecies, for most prophecies are [received] through *meshalim*, and in their *meshalim* appear many things without any meaning, consistent with the literal level (*mashal*), not the deeper meaning (*nimshal*). [For example,] according to the *Moreh*, of blessed memory, the matter of the lampstand and all that is associated with it in Zechariah's vision (4:1–3) follows this rule [lit. is thus], for the angel explained to him what all of this means: "This is the word of God to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might, nor by power, [but by My spirit]'" (4:6). And thus wrote the *Moreh*, of blessed memory, in II:43, that the intent of that entire *mashal* is nothing but what the angel explained to him. (*Sefer ha-Zikkaron* 41)

Ritba cites Maimonides' reduction of Zechariah's vision to a single "meaning" in order to show that he would indeed view the details of Abraham's vision as "meaningless." They are made necessary only by the prophetic medium, the dream form, which naturally occurs "with much business." He goes on to associate the application of the "great and important principle" with the great philosopher's views about the source of prophecy:

One need not be perplexed by meaningless details occurring in prophecy, since his opinion is that the imaginative faculty plays a crucial role in the prophecies of all prophets (with the exception of Moses), and all of those details are produced by the imagination. . . . As he writes in II:47, "We have already clarified and shown that all of the prophecy of the prophets is through *meshalim*, because this is the function of its vehicle, namely, the imaginative faculty" (*ibid.*, 42).

Ritba makes clear the connection Maimonides left implicit: the rule of *mashal* exegesis originally formulated in the *Guide* to accommodate

<sup>68</sup> Echoing the talmudic reasoning in connection with Job (above, n. 37).

<sup>69</sup> Lit. the guide or teacher; i.e., Maimonides, the author of the *Guide*, who himself can be called a "guide" for the perplexed.

literary creativity applies to prophecy because of its imaginative nature. Just as a literary *mashal* must adhere to poetic conventions, prophecy, which is received in the form of a vision, must adhere to the modalities of that medium.

Other Maimonidean commentators addressed another critique by Nahmanides:

According to this opinion of his [Maimonides], it would be necessary to explain the episode of Lot similarly, [i.e.,] that the angels did not actually enter his house and that he did not bake cakes for them to eat, but the whole thing was a vision. . . . But if everything was in the prophetic visions of Lot, then the whole following episode, "the angels urged Lot on [saying] 'Arise and take your wife. . . . Flee for your life!'" (19:15ff.), was also in a vision, which would mean that Lot remained in Sodom. . . . These words contradict Scripture, it is forbidden to listen to them and certainly to believe them. (Nahmanides, comm. on Gen 18:1)

Abarbanel, the fifteenth-century Spanish thinker and commentator on Maimonides, solves this problem by arguing that the episode of Lot's rescue by the angels was indeed a vision, but the one granted to Abraham, not Lot. Those dramatic scenes amount to an imaginative portrayal of what is described more prosaically in the subsequent passage, which, Abarbanel claims, supports Maimonides' reading:

Following the story of the angels . . . it is said . . . "It came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, He remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow . . ." (19:29). This verse points to the truth of Maimonides' opinion as I have explained [it]; i.e., first [Scripture] relates the vision, then, in this verse, relates how the deed was accomplished in actuality. If not interpreted in this manner, this verse serves no purpose inasmuch as Scripture already related above the destruction of the cities and the rescue of Lot. (Comm. on Guide II:42; Reines 1970:173-74)

Maimonides' *mashal* approach thus solves the problem of redundancy in the biblical text: Gen 19:1-26 is the vision granted to Abraham; Gen 19:27-29 describes events as they occurred in reality, what might be considered the *pitroa* of the vision.<sup>70</sup> What is important to note for our purposes is that what Abraham saw in his mind is an imaginative, highly dramatized version of a more prosaic reality.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Rosenberg 1981:117-18 places Abarbanel in the context of earlier Maimonidean commentators. On the term *pitroa*, see above, p. 120.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly a similar notion of dramatization underlies Nahmanides' sugges-

## 4.2 Hash'alah: Philological Analysis

Maimonides' *mashal* mode brings the features of his alternative *hash'alah* mode into sharp relief. Whereas the point of a *mashal* is to activate the imagination, *hash'alah* analysis keeps it in check. As we saw in chapter two, when Maimonides cites metaphorical (*hash'alah*) usages in the *Guide*, his intent is to supplant the literal sense of the language. A *shem mush'al* (metaphorical term) amounts to a dead metaphor; lacking a genuine *zāhir*, it has lost the capacity to produce imagery. Since the links between the metaphorical and literal senses of the *shem mush'al* are severed, the author of the *Guide* can categorize it together with the *shem meshuttaf* (equivocal term), i.e., a term shared coincidentally by two or more unrelated meanings. When interpreting a *mashal*, on the other hand, Maimonides accounts for the *zāhir* in literary or psychological terms, i.e., by arguing that the scenes depicted are merely fiction or mental visions. But when applying *hash'alah* analysis, he eradicates the literal sense by arguing that it is an incorrect construal of the language. This more forceful claim requires greater exegetical effort in the form of philological analysis (unnecessary in a *mashal* reading, which leaves the *zāhir* intact).<sup>72</sup> Our objective in this section is to explain why Maimonides deemed it worthwhile to make this exegetical investment in three principal biblical texts: [a] anthropomorphic depictions of God; [b] the creation story in Genesis; and [c] prophetic depictions of supernatural events.<sup>73</sup>

### 4.2.1 Anthropomorphism: The Lexicographic Approach

Nowhere is Maimonides' philological investment more evident than in his treatment of anthropomorphic depictions of God, a subject to

tion (comm. on Gen 11:28) that the Midrash about Abraham being miraculously saved from the "fiery furnace" is not meant literally. The *nimshal* he offers is less miraculous: after being imprisoned by an evil king, "God put it into the heart of that king . . . not to kill him, and so he released him from prison." On Nahmanides' view of interpreting Midrash figuratively, see Septimus 1983:11-25. Despite the fact that Nahmanides was willing to interpret Midrash as a dramatization, he was less comfortable doing so with an entire biblical narrative. (See, however, his comm. on Num 22:23, where he seems willing to adopt a Maimonidean reading with respect to a single phrase.)

<sup>72</sup> See Rosenberg 1981:107, 115, 121, who observes that otherwise problematic language need not be reinterpreted if it occurs in a prophetic vision.

<sup>73</sup> In addition to these three areas that entail philosophical "perplexities" (as he refers to them; introduction; 5), Maimonides applies linguistic analysis to other passages that are cited to support his philosophical exegesis.