# The Possibility of God Revealing Himself to Man According to Rashbam’s Commentary on the Pentateuch

The possibility of God revealing His form to His creations has preoccupied Jewish thinkers for generations. In this lecture, I will discuss Rashbam’s view on the subject. Like his French co-religionists in the eleventh and twelfth century, Rashbam did not present his beliefs systematically. Although he was not a philosopher and did not articulate a comprehensive theological approach, his discussions of the possibility of God revealing Himself to man are markedly systematic and original. Rashbam maintained that, in principle, God can reveal His form to man directly, without an intermediary. However, a person who *does* observe God is summarily sentenced to death. This position can be adduced from his comments on Exodus 24:11, Numbers 4:20, and Leviticus 16:2 which all imply that the “plague” which struck the residents of Beit Shemesh (as described in 1 Samuel 6) was the result of observing God. A similar fate is prescribed for a high priest or priests who observe God during the disassembling of the tabernacle.

Due to this position, Rashbam was forced to contend with numerous passages in which God is described as appearing to mortals without it resulting in their deaths. He accomplishes this using several interpretive tools as detailed below/I will describe shortly.

In some cases, Rashbam points to the unique circumstances of a revelation. In Rashbam’s opinion, there are four exceptions to the rule, four instances in which God appeared to His creations directly without it resulting in their deaths: the revelation to the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai; the revelation to Abraham at the Covenant of the Parts; the revelation to the “nobles of the children of Israel” after the theophany at Sinai (Ex. 24); and the revelation to Moses in the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33–34). Analogous claims are absent from the sources which preceded Rashbam, and it should be therefore considered an innovative approach on Rashbam’s part.

God’s revelation at Mount Sinai and the establishment of His covenant with the Nation of Israel is the most important act of theophany in Scripture. Rashbam addresses this revelation in several places: for example, in his commentary on Ex. 19:11 he writes, explicitly, that it was God, not an angel, who descended to the mountain. Likewise, in his commentary on Ex. 19:23, he explains that while the children of Israel were forbidden from drawing near to or climbing the mountain, they were not prohibited from witnessing the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence.

Rashbam discusses the other three exceptions in his commentary on Ex. 24:11 and Ex. 32:18. These cases are, in Rashbam’s view, connected to the covenant established between God and man. It is due to the importance of this covenant that God deigned to reveal Himself directly. Rashbam maintains that in these critical junctures in Jewish history, God deemed it necessary to appear in an act of unmediated revelation: the first covenant promised Abraham and his kin the Land of Israel, the second and third covenants are related to the theophany at Sinai, and the final covenant was established due to the uniqueness of Moses and the uniqueness of the Children of Israel. Rashbam’s greatest innovation relates to God’s encounter with the “nobles of Israel” after Sinai. This episode was cast by most early exegetes in a negative light; many argued that the event was not a direct, divine revelation. Rashbam, by contrast, considers the encounter one of the pinnacles of Jewish history.

Another method employed by Rashbam is to attribute biblical accounts of divine revelation to an angel or intermediary – not God Himself. When he first presents this approach, he describes it as a principle which can be applied to many cases: “*in many places*, when an angel appeared it is referred to as the Shekhinah” (Gen. 18:1). He applies the principle to nine cases, some of which we will demonstrate below/shortly.

1. In Genesis 18, God appears to Abraham to inform him of the future birth of Isaac and the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Rashbam emphasizes many times in his commentary on this chapter that any mention of God’s name refers not to the deity Himself but rather to an angel which revealed itself to Abraham. Of the ten instances of the tetragrammaton in this chapter, Rashbam ascribes seven to an angel, and only three to God Himself (in cases when the angels, as opposed to the narrator, refer to God).

2. Commenting on God’s revelation to Moses in the burning bush, Rashbam explains “‘and the Lord appeared’ – an angel speaking in God’s name” (Ex. 3:4).

3. During Moses’ journey to Egypt, the following incident is described: “and it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him.” Rashbam writes: “‘the LORD met him’ – an angel.” He reiterates this in his comments on the following verse: “‘and he released’ – the angel released him.”

4. Twice, Rashbam explains who, in his opinion, administered the plague of the first born. Scripture states “‘Thus says the LORD: About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt; and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die [...] But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog whet his tongue” (Ex. 11:4–7). Rashbam writes “‘a dog shall not whet his tongue’ – the angel will attack and destroy the firstborns of Egypt, but even the bark of animal demons will not harm the firstborns of Israel.” Rashbam thus indicates that it was not God who smote the firstborns of Egypt but rather an angel. In the following chapter, Scripture states “it is the LORD’s Passover. For I will go through the land of Egypt in that night and will smite all the first-born in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 12:11–12). Rashbam explains “‘it is the LORD’s Passover’ – meaning, that the angel will skip over and leave alone the home of the Israelite to smite the firstborn in the homes of the gentiles.” Here again we see that despite God’s use of the first person (“I will go through the land [...] I will smite”), Rashbam still maintains that the plague was carried out by an angel as opposed to God Himself.

6. “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; that they might go by day and by night” (Ex. 13:21). Rashbam writes “‘And the LORD went’ – an angel would lead before Israel a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud.”

In summary, in these cases and others, Rashbam explains that biblical descriptions of revelation refer not to God Himself but rather an angel. This is a consequence of his opinion that humans who see God Himself are condemned to death.

How does Rashbam reconcile the use of God’s personal name, the tetragrammaton, with his interpretation that an angel is responsible? Some scholars believe that according to Rashbam the angel which appears to man bears the personal name “YHWH.” I, however, disagree with this approach. I would instead suggest that according to Rashbam the angel can be referred to using the tetragrammaton because he is an emissary of God. To quote the talmudic truism, “an emissary is like the sender himself,” and therefore an angel can speak on his behalf.

Having examined a number of examples, we still do not know how Rashbam contends with the dozens of other passages in which God is observed by a human, such as “And the LORD appeared unto Abram [...] and he built there an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him” (Gen. 12:7); “And the LORD appeared unto him and said” (Gen. 26:2); “And the LORD appeared in the Tent in a pillar of cloud” (Deut. 31:15). To this should be added those passages in which God’s “glory” (*kavod*) appears to man, such as “and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud” (Ex. 16:10); “the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting unto all the children of Israel” (Num. 14:10); “and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the congregation” (Num. 16:19) and others. None of these verses are addressed by Rashbam explicitly.

We can perhaps find an oblique reference to such cases in Rashbam’s interpretation of the last encounter between Jacob and Joseph. Scripture states “And Israel *beheld* Joseph’s sons, and said: ‘Who are these?’” (Gen. 48:8). Rashbam is bothered by the continuation of the passage, which, in verse 10, stages “Now the eyes of Israel were dim from age, so that he could not see,” which seems to contradict verse 8. He, therefore, explains that Jacob beheld his grandchildren with hazy vision: “in some cases, one sees the shape of a person’s body, but cannot discern the shape of his face. Likewise [we find] ‘for man shall not see Me and live’, yet it is written [elsewhere] ‘I saw the LORD.’” Rashbam is referring to the apparent contradiction between God’s claim that man cannot see Him, and the statement of the prophet Micaiah the son of Imlah who claims to have done just that. According to Rashbam, this is not a contradiction as Micaiah did not *actually* observe God – that is, he was unable to clearly discern God’s face. We can thus hazard the conclusion that other biblical accounts describing humans witnessing God would be interpreted by Rashbam in a comparable manner. It seems that according to Rashbam, God can reveal His form to humans as a hazy image, thus saving them from harm. This kind of revelation seems to be less sublime than the direct revelations described above: while in a direct revelation, God’s back, not His face, is revealed it can at least be seen clearly. In other cases, God reveals Himself to man in an unclear form – man can only discern His general shape.

Why did Rashbam expend so much effort explicating this topic? Moreover, what prompted him to offer the complex – and unique – solution he did?

I believe that we can attribute Rashbam’s extensive treatment of divine revelation to Christian-Jewish polemics. An important claim in Christian polemics is that God’s revelation to the Children of Israel was, for many generations, inferior – God appeared to the Children of Israel through intermediaries, angels and prophets. This served as preparation for a superior form of revelation, a direct divine revelation to mankind in the form of Jesus. The source for this doctrine is Paul’s epistle to the Galatians: “What purpose, then, does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator” (Galatians 3:19). Origen writes along similar lines in his commentary on Song of Songs:

Because of this, I pour out my petition to Thee, the Father of my Spouse, beseeching Thee to have compassion at last upon my love, and to send Him, that He may no longer speak to me only by His servants the angels and the prophets, but may come Himself, directly [...] The kisses are Christ’s, which He bestowed on His Church when at His coming, being present in the flesh, He in His own person spoke to her the words of faith.”

Another central dispute between Judaism and Christianity is the possibility of God’s incarnation in the flesh, that is, whether he can descend to the world in physical form and be encountered directly. Christian doctrine maintained that the Son descended to the world in a body of flesh and blood, as Jesus. This conception was formulated explicitly during the First Nicaean Council (in 325 CE) and was codified in the Nicaean Creed as follows: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty [...] And in one Lord Jesus Christ, begotten of the Father [...] Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man.”

It seems that Rashbam – while treading softly – sought to contend with both claims. On the one hand, his assumption that one who beholds God is condemned to death represents a polemic against the possibility of a deity who comes down to the world in a body of flesh and blood – were he to reside among humans, God would condemn them to death. The claim that most instances of the revealed God in Scripture do not refer to an unmediated revelation, provided his readers an exegetical alternative, allowing them to effectively polemicize with the Christian approach to this issue.

However, by adopting this approach, Rashbam found himself conceding to the Christians on another front, admitting to the claim that the divine revelations to the Children of Israel were inferior, mediated by prophets and angels. Therefore, Rashbam is careful to emphasize that in certain cases God did indeed reveal Himself to man directly. Such cases are related to the covenant between God and Israel. The first covenant was related to the promise of the Land of Israel, the second and third covenants to the theophany at Sinai, and the final covenant was established based on the uniqueness of Moses and the uniqueness of the nation of Israel. That is, the appearance of God Himself – as opposed to an intermediary – reinforces His eternal covenant with Israel. Thus, Rashbam implicitly polemicizes against the Christian argument that the old covenant between God and Israel was based on a revelation of angels and was supplanted by a new covenant characterized by superiority and directness.

In summary, Rashbam in his commentary on the Pentateuch offers a systematic and comprehensive account of the possibility of God revealing Himself to man. In his opinion, it is possible, in principle, to observe the God of Israel, albeit at the cost of one’s life. Passages in which mortals witness God unscathed are explained by Rashbam in a number of ways: as exceptional cases related to the establishment of unique covenants; as the revelation of an angel as opposed to God Himself; or as a hazy, indirect observation of God’s form. It appears that beyond exegetical considerations, Rashbam took extra pains to interpret biblical passages pertaining to God’s self-revelation, in order to conduct a polemic against Christian exegesis which sought to downplay the intensity of God’s revelation to Israel, and which considered the descent of the Son incarnated as Jesus to be superior.