The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses

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In cooperation with
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Volume 1

The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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Preface

This is the first volume in the book series "Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses" (KCID), which publishes the results of the conferences organized by the Research Unit of the same name established at the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg. The conference on the concept of revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam was held in Erlangen on July 21–22, 2016.

The Research Unit KCID offers an innovative approach for studying the development of the three interconnected religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With this aim in mind, KCID analyzes the history of ideas in each of these three religions, always considering the tradition of interreligious exchange and appropriation of these very ideas. In doing so, KCID investigates the foundations of religious thought, thereby establishing an "archaeology of religious knowledge" in order to make manifest certain commonalities and differences between the three religions via dialogic study of their conceptual history. Thus, KCID intends to contribute to an intensive academic engagement with interreligious discourses in order to uncover mutually intelligible theoretical foundations and increase understanding between these different religious communities in the here and now. Moreover, KCID aims to highlight how each religion's self-understanding can contribute to mutual understanding and peace between the three religious communities in the world.

In order to explore key concepts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, KCID organizes conferences individually dedicated to specific concepts. A renowned set of researchers from various disciplines explore these concepts from the viewpoints of each of the three religions. The results of each conference are published in a volume appearing in the abovementioned book series. Particularly salient selections from each volume are made available online in Arabic, English and German.

In this fashion, the Research Unit KCID fulfills its aspirations not only by reflecting on central religious ideas amongst a small group of academic specialists, but also by disseminating such ideas in a way that will appeal to the broader public. Academic research that puts itself at the service of society is vital in order to counteract powerful contemporary trends toward a form of segregation rooted in ignorance. Mutual respect and acceptance amongst religions is thereby strengthened. Such a result is guaranteed due to the methodology deployed by the research unit, namely the dialogic investigation of the history of concepts, as documented in the present volume on the concept of revelation.

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I wish to thank Dr. Albrecht Döhnert, Dr. Sophie Wagenhofer and their assistants at the publishing house De Gruyter for their competent caretaking of this volume and the entire book series.

Georges Tamer
Erlangen, September 2019

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Frederek Musall

The Concept of Revelation in Judaism

> *"She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her, and happy is everyone that holds her fast; her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." (Proverbs 3:17–18)*[1]

A Preliminary Note:

While Jews and Christians share most of the biblical books, they fundamentally differ in questions of canon. A canon is not just an order of sequence, but also a theological construct, shaping the very understanding of how to approach and read texts; it represents a principle theological decision and conception.

The Jewish biblical canon is a tripart arrangement, comprising the Torah (Pentateuch) Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings) and commonly referred to by its acronym TaNa"Kh. Unlike the Christian biblical canon, the Jewish canon is not structured chronologically, but rather reflects three different stages of significance: At the core is the Torah, the immediate revelation given at Mount Sinai; next are the works of the prophets, which as mediated prophecies often recall the teachings of the Torah; finally come the Writings, which instead of representing prophecies express human reflections of the encounter with and experience of the Divine.

I deem it important to raise awareness of this, as our respective understanding of revelation is shaped by the canonic conceptions and connotations we have in mind – conceptions and connotations that might lead to misunderstandings when being under the impression that Jews and Christians basically read the same biblical texts.

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1 Here in the reversed sequence of the verses, commonly sung in many Ashkenazi synagogues when the *Torah* scrolls are returned to the ark after their public reading. In Jewish tradition, the *Torah* has been compared to the "tree of life" (*etz chayyim*) in the Story of Creation (Gen. 2:9). For almost two years I lived on Shady Avenue in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, right across from the Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha synagogue on Wilkins Avenue. While it was not the synagogue that I attended (as a popular Jewish saying/joke goes), many of my friends and neighbors did. But on some occasions, like for example the community-wide *Tiqqun Leyl Shavu'ot*, the night of learning on the holiday of Shavuot, even we students from the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), the Orthodox youth movement, went there to celebrate the giving of the *Torah* at Mount Sinai by listening to *shi'urim* ("lectures") and enjoying *kosher* cheese cake. When the anti-Semitic hate-crime took place on October 27th 2018, the vile and senseless murder of eleven innocent people that peacefully attended Shabbat morning services that day, it really struck home. To their blessed memory, this essay is dedicated.

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1 Remarks and Frameworks

1.1 Introductory Remarks

According to our modern way of understanding the order of things, said things have to fit into boxes, fall into categories, or apply to notions. Boxes, categories, and notions are necessary because they enable us to speak and relate to one another about how we perceive, process, comprehend, and interpret the world surrounding us. In other words: They allow for a basic orientation in a complex world. There appears to be, however, an epistemological drawback to this: All these boxes, categories, and notions we operate with, as well as the meanings and connotations we ascribe to them, tend to eventually become self-evident. Self-evidence often suggests that something speaks for itself, having a clear meaning, and that no further explanations are needed. Yet if we actually bother to take a closer look, we will eventually find out that this is where things start to get complicated…

Take for example 'religion': We all seem to have a more or less clear idea of what is meant by it; most of us even tend to have some kind of position towards it. Still, in our understanding of religion we often differ because, in fact, it very much depends on how we approach it, what experiences we have, and what knowledge we possess.[2] The study of religion as an academic discipline, for instance, offers a variety of etic approaches towards, and definitions of, religion – for example, discerning essential features (substantialist definition), asking about social functions (functionalist definition), or analyzing discursive formations (cultural studies' approach). However, the way one methodically approaches religion must by no means reflect how people who practice or identify with a certain religion understand their own religious beliefs and practices. Theology, on the other hand, as an emic scholarly endeavor, does not necessarily need to concern itself with the question of what religion is or how it can be objectively defined. Its task is rather to reflect upon its religious self-understanding and self-determination or to formulate its fundamental beliefs and doctrines. Accordingly, the study of religion and theology differ in their respective vantage points and methods. However, to simply call the former an objective method and the latter a subjective one would miss a crucial point: each respective approach does not only offer a particular perspective, but also tells a particular story. This is a narrative to which we can relate (one that in turn allows us to re-

2 Yandell, Keith E., *Philosophy of Religion. A Contemporary Introduction*, London/New York: Routledge, 1999, 16.

late to things); a narrative we both are actively and passively embedded in; and a narrative which enables us not only to relate to the past, but to shape the here and now.

I have to admit that these epistemological reflections and considerations are owed to my own philosophical views and poststructuralist dispositions. Nevertheless I am also certain that they apply to the very task at hand: A central problem often encountered in interreligious settings is that while people might share a common language, they tend to understand and relate to ideas, concepts, and definitions quite differently. This should not come as much of a surprise: Ideas, concepts, and definitions are, after all, not only constructed, but they also come with certain connotations and associations which imply that the meanings we ascribe to things are context-dependent. We all are embedded in certain historical, social, cultural, or religious frameworks. Frameworks that often intersect. Accordingly, the semantic fields we all operate with or within are produced and shaped by our respective knowledge and experiences. So when we encounter something that is different, foreign, or new to us, we tend to rely on ideas, concepts, and definitions that we are familiar with. Martin Buber (1878 – 1965) suggested in his *I and Thou* that in encountering the other we should refrain from using any presumptions, preconceptions, or images.[3] But that is often easier said than done. Maybe instead of trying to blank them out, we should rather attempt to critically scrutinize and re-examine them, based on and shaped by our encounter and experience with the 'other'. By doing so it should become clear that ideas, concepts, and definitions are discursively constructed. They are constantly negotiated; they are contextual and flexible, rather than fixed. Because our frameworks intersect with the frameworks of the 'other,' we – through the process of discourse and negotiation – can eventually arrive at a new understanding, a new understanding not only in relation to the 'other,' but also regarding ourselves.

I guess what I am trying to say is that the understanding of the concept of revelation in Judaism as conveyed in the following is not a definition but a narrative, one constructed and shaped by my personal and professional considerations and reflections, both as a Jew and as a scholar of Jewish Studies. It is an interaction of the within and the without – the emic and the etic – as different and differing as these vantage points might be. Moreover, these two also affect my understanding of the concept of 'revelation' as well as of what 'Judaism' is.

I therefore deem it important to problematize these notions and concepts in relation to the different narratives (ontological, public, conceptual, or meta-nar-

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3 Buber, Martin, *I and Thou,* London: Continuum, 2004, 13 – 15.

rative)[4] at work. After all, they not only have an impact on how one perceives the world, but also on how one relates to it or acts within it. This might also explain why hereafter I am not intending to attempt any kind of systematic-theological inquiry, as this would a) imply ordering ideas and concepts hierarchically, and b) establish and represent an ideological position. Rather I would like to try to lend a voice to the discursive polyphony, trying to capture the multi-perspectivity and multi-narrativity that, in both my personal opinion and professional understanding, makes up Judaism. This flows not just out of an appreciation for the plurality of the religious tradition that I myself am embedded in, but out of my awareness that my understanding, as articulated here, will eventually also affect the understanding of others.

1.2 Some General Observations on the Concept of Revelation

Like the notion and concept of religion, 'revelation' can be approached from different perspectives, with various epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, ethical, and religious considerations and implications coming into play.

In a classic structuralist manner, concepts or notions can best be explained in relation to their respective antonyms, which in the case of 'revelation' is 'concealment.' Taking this into consideration, its semantic field resonates that 'that-which-is-(to-be)-revealed' must have been 'concealed' or 'hidden' beforehand, yet in its current state is somehow unperceivable or inaccessible to our senses or beyond cognition. Accordingly, the state of 'concealment' does not propose an absence of 'that-which-is-(to-be)-revealed'; on the contrary, it rather suggests the presence of 'that-which-is-concealed' and has *not yet* been discerned or disclosed.

In a religious context, the concept of revelation concerns the relationship between divine and concrete reality. It is an act through which the Divine makes itself or its will known and accessible, either through an act of self-revelation or through a medium or mediator disclosing the Divine. Accordingly, revelation allows human beings to relate to the Divine. It is a mode of discerning, knowing, and communicating. Communication can take place verbally and non-verbally; it can be one-way or two-way; it can be understood directly or is in need of processing, translation, or interpretation; it occurs between the Divine and an indi-

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4 Somers, Margaret R./Gibson, *Gloria D.*, "*Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other.' Narrative* and the Social Constitution of Identity," in: Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, 1994, 37–99, Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

vidual or a group of people. Revelation can be natural or supernatural in origin, with the latter sometimes viewed as a superior form of knowledge within certain epistemological frameworks. Furthermore, revelation encompasses various social functions as well; it can serve as the narrative framework for a community, defining its history, its values, and its norms. It provides orientation and guidance concerning how we encounter, relate to, and interpret the world.

1.3 Narratives

After this brief etic approach towards the concept of revelation, let us now attempt a first take on revelation in Judaism from an emic perspective. Revelation is generally considered a core principle of Judaism, even described by R. David Novak as the most important doctrine for Jewish theology, as, after all, Jewish theology is mainly concerned with interpretation of the divinely revealed text, the Torah.[5] But is it not – conceptually speaking – too narrow to simply confine revelation to a single text?

The German-Jewish philosopher and theologian Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) in his seminal work *The Star of Redemption* (1921) distinguished between a *general* and a *specific* meaning of revelation.[6] General revelation is that which allows the transcendent God to relate to the immanent world. This way of relating through revelation is reified in three moments in history, namely creation, revelation, and redemption, which for Rosenzweig are the main themes of the biblical narrative. However, this triadic process of creation–revelation–redemption is for him more than just a concept; it rather constitutes the foundational framework of reality itself. Rosenzweig's specific understanding of revelation, on the other hand, relates to the notion of 'Torah,' yet he often uses it in a rather indeterminate way, as it appears that he does not want to simply confine the notion of 'Torah' to the *Chumash* or *Pentateuch*.[7] Rather, the other books of the Hebrew Bible along with the classical works of rabbinical literature are all for him sources of revelation.

In other words, revelation is more than just *a* text. It can refer to a) said textual source, the Torah; b) the experience of receiving the Torah (popularly

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5 Novak, David, "Revelation," in: Nicholas de Lange/Miri Freud-Kandel (eds), *Modern Judaism. An Oxford Guide*, 278–289, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 278.
6 Rosenzweig, Franz, *The Star of Redemption*, transl. Barbara E. Galli, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, 169–220.
7 Benjamin, Mara H., *Rosenzweig's Bible. Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 142–143.

termed as the "standing at Mount Sinai (*ma'amad har Sinay*)" or the "giving of the *Torah* (*matan Torah*)"); and c) that which follows from the Torah, namely the interpretations and commentary literature. However, the Torah is more than just this: God reveals the Torah at Mount Sinai, but through the revelation of the Torah God reveals Himself and makes His will be known. The Torah gives the account of God's interaction with His creation and His acting in history, yet the Torah is also the medium through which God interacts with His creation and acts in history. It is therefore the object, content, and method of revelation.

In order to make these rather abstract assumptions more tangible, I would like to sketch out a short narrative approach to how the concept of revelation is commonly presented in 'Jewish tradition'[8] (a term I actually prefer to 'Judaism' when speaking about religious concepts and ideas, as it gives fuller expression to the relationship between foundational literary texts and historical experience). The biblical text itself presents various types of revelatory experiences: It starts off in the book of Genesis with God as the Creator revealing Himself to His creation and interacting with a few significant figures like Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, sometimes directly (Gen. 12:1–4; 17:1–21; 18:17–33; 22:1–2), sometimes through intermediaries (Gen. 16:7–8; 18:1–16; 22:11–12; 32:22–32), through visions (Gen. 15:1; Gen. 35:1–15), or dreams (Gen. 28:10–19). In the book of Exodus, however, revelation is taken to a whole new level, namely when God reveals himself not only to certain individuals, but to an entire group of people at and through the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19–24). It is here in the wilderness of Sinai where the covenant is made between God and the Israelites, who have been chosen by God to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (*mamlekhet kohanim ve-goy kadosh*)" (Exod. 19:5–6). Due to the covenant, they are henceforth duty-bound to follow God's will, which is set down in the laws and practices revealed at Mount Sinai, and is according to rabbinic tradition transmitted in both "written (*bi-khtav*)" and "oral (*be-al-peh*)" form (*Pirqey Avot* 1:1; b. *Shabbat* 31a; *RaSH"Y* on Deut. 30:14).

But over the course of time, the Israelites more and more neglect these laws and practices and stray off the path God has destined them to walk. Once again, God reveals himself to chosen individuals, to prophets (*nevi'im*) whose task it is to act as intermediaries and convey God's messages to the Israelites, warning them that they need to change their ways or else face the consequences of their actions. The destruction of the First Temple in the year 586 BCE and the

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8 On this matter, see Rotenstreich, Nathan, *Tradition and Reality. The Impact of History on Modern Jewish Thought*, New York/Toronto: Random House, 1972, particularly 7–18.

subsequent Babylonian Captivity mark a decisive turning point in Jewish history: While it is generally interpreted as a sign of God's punishment, it does not amount to Him forsaking His people. Rather, God remains with Israel in exile. In His revelations to the prophets during the exilic period, He strikes a new tone: Prophecies encouraging the Israelites to trust God in bringing about imminent redemption. Most prominently, the prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah speak of national and religious restoration with the return of the captives to the land of Israel and the ultimate rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the end of prophetic activity, which according to rabbinic tradition ceased to exist with the last prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (t. *Sotah* 13:2–3; b. *Bava Batra* 14a; b. *Yoma* 21b; b. *Sanhedrin* 65b), the rabbis eventually took it upon themselves to act as legitimate successors of the prophets (b. *Bava Batra* 12a). In fact, according to rabbinic understanding the *talmidey chakhamim* (the Torah scholars), with their knowledge and understanding of the revealed text, are held in higher regard than a prophet (*Sifrey Numbers* § 112; b. *Horayot* 13a). Nevertheless, the rabbis were well aware that their own historical and social contexts differed from those of the Bible. Their complex discourses reflect their endeavors to relate the biblical tradition to their respective actual situations, thereby upholding and guaranteeing the continuity of a dynamic tradition commonly referred to as the "chain of tradition" (*shalshelet ha-qabbalah*) (*Pirqey Avot* 1:1–18, 2:8). The Torah hence has to be understood as a complex frame of reference, comprised not only of the *Written Torah* and the *Oral Torah*, both revealed at Mount Sinai, but furthermore of all the interpretations, contributions, and innovations made by the rabbis over the course of time as articulated in their diverse legal, theological, philosophical, or mystical writings. According to the rabbinic understanding, as a result the concept of Torah encompasses various generations with different religious needs, concerns, and sensibilities, who have faced different situations and challenges, coming up with different interpretations and decisions.[9] It allows for articulating the existing anew and to actualize that which is fundamentally given forever.

1.4 Categorizations: Judaism as a 'Revealed Religion'(?)

As we have seen so far, revelation (comprised of – according to rabbinic tradition – both the *Written Torah* and the *Oral Torah*) makes up the core of classical Jew-

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9 Hartman, David, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition. An Ancient People Debating Its Future*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2000, 161.

ish belief. But is it therefore objective to characterize and define Judaism as a 'revealed religion,' as often referred to and portrayed in respective literature? In other words: Is Judaism solely based on revelation or only defined by it?

A closer examination shows that the very term 'revealed religion' is in itself not unproblematic; it resonates with much of the critical attitude of the Enlightenment towards the concept of supernatural revelation as well as any form of doctrinal dependence on it. That is not to say that there ever existed one unified position on this matter, as Enlightenment thought is in fact comprised of a variety of opinions and positions towards religion, ranging from deism to fideism to atheism. What, however, somehow brought together these different views was that they were challenging the truth-claims constitutional for certain religious beliefs and doctrines. Due to new scientific discoveries and developments, the classically defined relationship between reason and revelation as sources of knowledge and truth was up for a critical re-examination. While it had been a central subject of medieval philosophical-theological discourse – with thinkers like R. Saʿadiyah Gaon (882–942), R. Abraham ibn Daud (ca. 1110–ca. 1180), or R. Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) springing to mind – this relationship had in many instances been defined hierarchically, with philosophy as reason-based knowledge often ending up as the handmaiden of theology as revelation-based knowledge. Enlightenment thinkers set out to fundamentally change that by attempting to divide the two concepts from one another. Not only did they establish reason as an independent source of knowledge, but due to its ascribed universal accessibility they furthermore declared it as the superior form of knowledge as well. This subsequently led to a skeptical stance towards the very idea or belief in some form of supernatural revelation. In their engagement with religion, the deists elaborated on the idea of a 'natural religion', which is not dependent on any kind of supernatural revelation and solely based on man's faculty of reason. They thereby ultimately reduced religion to some core beliefs like the existence of God, moral duties and the immortality of the soul, while getting rid of all those elements which they considered irrational, supernatural, superstitious, or legalistic.

In its struggle for the fundamental principles of individual freedom and equality, the Enlightenment's attacks were first and foremost aimed at the validity and authority of Christianity's truth-claims as well as the Church as an institution of political power; yet it was Judaism that had to take the blow. After all, for many leading Enlightenment figures including Voltaire (1694–1778), Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), or Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Judaism was synonymous with the "Old Testament," embodying the very belief in supernatural revelation which they intellectually sought to overcome. The assumed superiority of universal reason over a partic-

ular and supernatural revelation often resulted in a reductionist view of Jewish beliefs and practices. In fact, Judaism eventually became the main representation of the 'other', serving as a categorical lens through which Enlightenment thinkers defined and classified 'other' forms of religious beliefs that in their opinion did not conform with European, Western, and Christian ideas and articulations.

Despite the initiatives of people like John Toland (1670 – 1772), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729 – 1781), or Christian Wilhelm Dohm (1751 – 1820), the overall Enlightenment attitude towards Judaism and the Jews was rather quite paternalistic, condescending, and prejudiced. Nevertheless, its ideas of human equality and emancipation encouraged Jews to embrace and become engaged in its own project of social and cultural transformation. Attempting to reform Judaism on their own terms, prominent representatives of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, like Moses Mendelssohn (1729 – 1786) or his associate Naphtali Herz (Hartwig) Wessely (1725 – 1804), were facing the challenge to articulate a new Jewish self-understanding that would allow them to remain committed to both their philosophical ideals and their Jewish religion. In his opus magnum *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783) Mendelssohn eventually argued that Judaism could and should not be defined as a 'revealed religion', but rather as a 'revealed legislation', which is legally binding solely to the Jewish people.[10] He furthermore expressed his belief that Judaism essentially combined both universal rational principles and particular revealed laws. Or to be more precise: it entails particular revealed laws, which in turn lead to universal rational principles. By doing so, he picked up on the conception of Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677) that the Bible, despite being primarily a particular political document, indeed contained universal truths. Yet unlike Spinoza and many Enlightenment thinkers in his wake, Mendelssohn did not consider the Jewish 'ceremonial laws' obsolete, but rather understood them as an educational medium to teach about principal moral and social norms.[11] In a similar fashion, Wessely distinguished in his *Divrey Shalom ve-Emet* ("Words of Peace and Truth"; 1782) between the universally accessible "Law of Man" (*Torat ha-adam*) and the "Law of God" (*Torat ha-Elokim*[12]) accessible through revealed knowledge, though he gave clear preference to the former as he actually deemed it being a prerequisite to the latter.

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10 Mendelssohn, Moses, *Jerusalem. Or, on Religious Power and Judaism*, Hanover: NH & London: University of New England Press, for Brandeis University Press, 1983, 97.

11 Eisen, Arnold, "Divine Legislation as 'Ceremonial Script.' *Mendelssohn* on the Commandments," in: *AJS Review* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1990), 239 – 67.

12 It is traditionally customary not to spell out the name of God, even a transliterated form, hence it is spelled here with a 'k' instead of 'h.'

The educational reforms promoted by *Haskalah* must be understood as a Jewish reaction to the challenge of modernity. They were first and foremost aimed at determining a new place for Jews within the intellectual parameters and social frameworks defined by secular Western-European societies. This not only fundamentally changed Jewish self-understanding in regard to the new social and cultural options that it had opened up, but it also brought conflicting priorities and loyalties to the surface, which eventually made it necessary to find and articulate new expressions of Judaism.

1.5 Crossroads

The Enlightenment – and in its wake the *Haskalah* – also had a profound impact on Jewish interpretations and understandings of revelation. Moses Mendelssohn still understood the 'revealed legislation' – and the respective *halakhic* (legal) system based upon it – as binding for Jews, yet to many of his co-religionists his overall stance towards Jewish tradition seemed inconsistent: The traditionalists feared that Mendelssohn's emphasis on the universal values would eventually give rise to a downplay of Jewish religious practices, whereas the more liberal voices who advocated a reform of Judaism ultimately criticized him for letting himself still be confined to the restrictive authoritative framework of traditional-normative Judaism.

Consequently, Mendelssohn's successors explored different options, which not only concerned their take on modernity and progress, but also their approach towards revelation as a source of Jewish self-understanding. R. Abraham Geiger (1810 – 1874) for example, one of the founding father of the Reform movement in Germany, was not so much concerned with the question of defining the relationship between reason and revelation, but was rather interested in what role revelation could play for the individual consciousness of a Jew. For him the idea of revelation was no longer tied to particular legal traditions, but rather found expression in the concept of a 'religious genius' of the Jewish people.[13] This 'religious genius' implied a consciousness of the God-idea shared by all Jews, which ultimately expressed itself not only as a special insight, but as a creativity aimed at aspiring to and achieving a greater good. In Geiger's understand-

13 Grözinger, Karl E., "Abraham Geigers theologische Wende vor dem Hintergrund der neuzeitlichen Debatte von Religion und Vernunft," in: Christian Wiese/Walter Homolka/Thomas Brechenmacher (eds), *Jüdische Existenz in der Moderne. Abraham Geiger und die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 15 – 36, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, 34 – 35.

ing, revelation was a 'religious idea' with ethical implications rather than a legal tradition.

Counter to this view, Geiger's contemporary R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), the founding figure of so-called Neo-Orthodoxy, argued that "since the completion of the Written and Oral Law at Horeb, the determination of its content is not tied to prophetic inspiration from heaven".[14] In other words, the ultimate authority of Jewish law derives from its very divine origin, which furthermore accounts for its self-consistency, meaning that it does not depend on any kind of 'religious genius.' Hirsch furthermore distinguished between four general forms or sources of revelation, namely nature, history, law, and consciousness, all of which serve as enabling structures to allow for mankind's improvement and ultimate realization as God's partner in creation. For Hirsch, revelation is all about a consequent actualization of the revealed.

The main difference between Geiger and Hirsch – who are taken here illustratively for the simple reason that they are former friends turned rivals – is that, according to Geiger's understanding, actualization is not dependent on any kind of tradition, while for Hirsch any attempt of actualization must always be conscious of and therefore corresponding to tradition.

Yet despite their apparent differences, Geiger's and Hirsch's approaches can nevertheless both be characterized as optimistic, as they share the principal belief in the transformative process of actualization through revelation, which allows for the ultimate realization of human perfection.

However, this optimistic outlook of the 19th century came eventually to an abrupt end: The traumatic events and crisis during the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th century – from the fallout of the Dreyfus affair to the total collapse of Western civilization and its values through World War I and Word War II, and the systematic persecution and murder of 6 million Jews during the Shoah – deeply upset and distressed Jewish thinkers concerned with these questions. Consequential responses to these developments and experiences demanded conceptual shifts in Jewish theological thought. Particularly those commonly labeled as "Jewish existentialists" (comprising thinkers as diverse as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995), and R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993)) took it upon themselves to explore and articulate new directions in Jewish philosophical-theological thought, thereby putting a stronger emphasis on the human existential dimension and relevance of revelation.

14 Hirsch, Samson Raphael, *Horeb. A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*, transl. Isidore Grunfeld, London: Soncino Press, 1962, 21.

Yet while these voices are presently still echoing, it appears that today the overall belief in revelation plays an even less important role within the broader framework of what Judaism is in modern times, as ethno-national, political, cultural, or even humanistic ideological articulations and positions have opened up new alternatives of Jewish self-understanding and self-determination. Moreover, it is the hybridity of these possible self-definitions that poses a challenge to understanding Judaism not only from without, but also from within. Today, to be a Jew can encompass many things – many of them even concurrently – as the quest for individuation is shifting more and more from the collective to the individual. With these developments typical for Western culture in mind, the main question – to pick upon the provocative book title of the Israeli historian of philosophy Menachem Kellner (b. 1946) – maybe has to be: Is a Jew still obligated to believe in anything?[15]

1.6 Summary

To briefly sum up for the moment: We have seen that the concept and corresponding understanding of revelation in Judaism is not a static one, but over the course of history underwent various (re-)interpretations and transformations, making it rather difficult to come up with something like a single precise definition. Yet apart from the contextualizations we need to make in order to discern its respective meanings and connotations, at the same time we must be aware that revelation can conceptually resonate and therefore represent many different things simultaneously: A relationship between divine and concrete reality, a medium of transmission, a process of transmission, a mode of knowing, an orientation, an act of uncovering.

It furthermore should have become clear that we have to carefully distinguish between the concept of revelation in Judaism and the concept of Judaism as a 'revealed religion', as the latter is for many reasons not unproblematic, despite some recent scholarly attempts to justify such conceptions.[16]

The dynamic, discursive, and non-dogmatic framework Judaism provides is nowadays challenged by needs for and expectations of a clear orientation in re-

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15 Kellner, Menachem M., *Must a Jew Believe in Anything?*, Oxford/New York: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, ^{2}2006.

16 See for example Fleischacker, Samuel, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World. A Defense of Revealed Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; see also the critique by Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Review of Samuel Fleischacker, Divine Teaching and the Way of the World (Oxford University Press, 2011)," in: *Philosophical Review* 125 (1/2016), 151–154.

gard to a world that is perceived as having become more and more complex. Yet the need for clarity, often due to a loss of knowledge and an uncertainty about one's tradition, threatens the very tolerance of ambiguity that in my eyes makes up Judaism. Maybe that is why instead of offering definitions and classifications, as scholars usually do, I would rather like to sensitize the readers to the complexities of what Judaism was in the past, what is at present, and how it will eventually develop and articulate itself in the future. I do so because I not only think that clear-cut categories fall short of adequately capturing its multifacetedness, but because it seems more than odd and questionable to me to override the varieties of Jewish religious experiences and self-determination by trying to fit them into said categories.

I consider it important to raise awareness of these issues made above due to the discursive framework provided in this book. To create a sensitivity and appreciation for the key concepts in inter-religious dialogue, we are beforehand tasked to sincerely scrutinize and explicate out the very criteria that we apply to our respective identifications, assessments, and definitions.

2 Concepts and Ideas

2.1 Notions

It might prove interesting to some readers that there exists no word that would adequately translate as "revelation" in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the three Hebrew verb roots *g-l-h* (גלה; "to uncover", "to reveal"), *r-'a-h* (ראה; "to see"), and *y-d-'a* (ידע; "to know") are frequently used (particularly in their reflexive *nif'al* forms) to describe the human encounter with and experience of the Divine, differing in their respective semantics and thus offering different connotations of how revelation might actually occur.

The verb *g-l-h* (גלה, "to uncover", "to reveal") generally refers to forms of sensory awareness and perception. For example as used in the phrase *galah ozen p'* (literally "to open up someone's ear," "to disclose something to somebody") in order to reveal something to someone (1Sam. 9:15; 20:2, 12, 13; 22:8, 17; Ruth 4:4). It is frequently used to describe the act of God revealing himself, either to a prophetic mediator (1Sam. 9:15; Isa. 22:14) or to an ordinary human being (Job 33:16; 36:10, 15). In other places, it represents God's way of bestowing prophecy (1Sam. 2:27; 3:7, 21; Amos 3:7; Dan. 10:1). While in the verses referred to above it often indicates an auditory experience of the Divine, it can also refer to visual experiences, as for example in Jacob's theophanic encounter at Bet El ("[B]ecause there God was revealed unto him (*ki sham niglu elav ha-Elo-*

kim)", Gen. 35:7, in reference to Gen. 28:10–22) or Balaam's vision of the angel ("And the Lord opened up Balaam's eyes (*va-yigal Hashem et-'einey Bil'am*)", Num. 22:31). In Isaiah, it is also used to describe God's acting in history ("And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (*ve-niglah kevod Hashem*)", Isa. 40:5; 53:1; 56:1).

Regarding the divine law, an important onto-epistemological distinction is made between 'that-which-is-concealed' and 'that-which-is-revealed': "The concealed things (*ha-nistarot*) belong unto the Lord, our God; but the things that are revealed (*ha-niglot*) belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:28). Nevertheless, in other passages the hope is expressed that God will not withhold anything from His children (1 Sam. 20:2).

The verb *g-l-h* can take on a secondary meaning, referring to a "state of exile" (Ezek. 12:3; Isa. 24:11; Job 20:28) or "captivity" (Amos 1:5; Jer. 13:19; Ezek. 39:28). The nouns *golah* and *galut,* which both refer to a "state of exile" or a "community in exile", have themselves become central theological concepts in Judaism; and particularly in modern Jewish thought the etymological relatedness between *galut* ("exile") and *hitgalut* ("revelation") has furthermore developed into a central theme of theological speculation and discourse. (It is worth noting that the noun *hitgalut* ("revelation"), which eventually has become the Modern Hebrew word for "revelation", actually first appears in later rabbinic literature.)

While *g-l-h* allows for wide range of sensory experiences and cognition, the verb *r-'a-h* (ראה; "to see") puts a clear emphasis on the visual aspect of revelation. Its semantics suggest that which perceived is somehow visually perceivable and must possess some form of visual manifestation. This consequently implies that God must have some kind of visual manifestation, which is often called *mareh* ("appearance", "sight," "vision"). When Moses first encounters God at burning bush at Mount Horeb, what he actually perceives is the "appearance of the angel of the Lord (*va-yera malakh Hashem elav*)", which is also described as "the great appearance (*ha-mareh ha-gadol*)" (Exod. 3:2–3). God appears in a "pillar of cloud (*'amud anan*)" and in a "pillar of fire (*'amud esh*)," thus visually perceivable to guide the Israelites through the wilderness of Sinai by day and by night (Exod. 13:21–22; Num. 14:14; Deut. 1:33; Ps. 99:7; Neh. 9:12; 9:19; Ps. 99:7). Shortly before Moses' death on Mount Nebo, God once more "appeared [...] in a pillar of cloud" at the Tent of Meeting (Deut. 31:15) in order to teaching him a "song (*shir*)" as an instruction for Israelites in the time after Moses' passing (Deut. 32:16–18; 32:1–43). Another well-known example of a visual manifestation is the "visions of God (*mar'ot Elokim*)" of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1–28; 8:1–16).

All these "appearances" and "visions" suggest that the 'hidden' God is somehow discernable, mediated through certain phenomena. Nevertheless, there are also passages that seem to suggest that He can be visually perceived directly. For example, from the dramatic encounter of his wrestling with the 'angel of God'[17] at the river Jabbok, Jacob emerges a changed man, as 'Israel,' stating: "[F]or I have seen God face-to-face, and my life is preserved (*ki ra'iti Elokim panim el-panim va-tinatzel nafshi*)" (Gen. 32:31). In addition, Moses' special status as a prophet and law-giver is generally derived from his ability to relate to God directly: "[T]he Lord spoke to Moses face-to-face like a man speaks to his fellow man (*ve-dibber Hashem el-Mosheh panim el-panim ka-asher yedaber ish el-re'ehu*)" (Exod. 33:11). However, when Moses asks to actually see God's "glory (*kavod*)," which in the context of this passage is taken as synonymous for His countenance, God responds negatively, emphasizing the impossibility of Moses' request: "You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me and live!" (Exod. 33:20). However, He allows him to glance at His "(back)side (*achoray*)", which later on becomes a central motif in Jewish theological exegesis.

That something is visually perceivable seems to attest to some kind of proof: When God reveals Himself to Moses at Mount Horeb, He refers to the patriarchs as reliable witnesses who have experienced God's presence beforehand: "I also appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (*va-era el-Avraham el-Yitzchak ve-el-Ya'akov*)" (Exod. 6:3).

The noun *ro'eh* is sometimes used as an old-fashioned or alternative designation for a prophet (Isa. 30:10; 1 Sam. 9:9). Furthermore, there seems to exist some kind of relationship between God's appearance and God's speech. The phrase "And He appeared to him (*va-yera elav*)," which is found in many places throughout the Hebrew Bible, often serves as some kind introductory formulation to the divine speech which is about to follow (e.g. Gen. 18:1–15; 26:2–3; Judg. 6:12; 1Kings 3:5; 9:2).

While *g-l-h* and *r-'a-h* seem speak about a sensory perception, the verb *y-d-'a* (ידע; "to know," "to discover") refers to a mental cognition, processing, and eventual understanding of what is perceived. Unlike the former, it does not necessarily depend on or involve any kind of visual image or acoustic experience. Moreover, it articulates some kind an intuition or knowledge allowing an apprehension not necessarily what God is but rather what He wants (Exod. 33:13; Hosea 2:22; Eccles. 3:14) – an awareness of the divine will, which the wicked, on the other side, are lacking, ignoring, or rejecting (e.g. 1Sam. 2:12; Jer. 2:8;

17 While in Gen. 32:25 the scene is described that Jacob wrestled with a "man (*ish*)", in Hosea 12:5 this "man" is identified as an "angel (*malakh*)".

4:22; Job 18:21). This apprehension also implicates an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty: "Yet I am the Lord, your God, from the land of Egypt; but you know no God but me (*ve-Elokim zulati lo teda'*)" (Hosea 13:4). As the latter statement is not apprehended or accepted by the others nations and their leaders (Exod. 5:2), the prophets beseech God to act and reveal Himself by demonstrating His power and might in order "[t]o make Your name known to Your adversaries (*le-hodia' shimkha le-tzareykha*), that the nations might tremble at Your presence" (Isa. 64:1), going as far as to evoke drastic consequences for ignoring God's will and sovereignty: "Pour out your wrath upon the nations that do not know You (*shefokh chamatekha el ha-goyim asher lo-yeda'ukha*)" (Ps. 79:6). Their visions of divine wrath should, however, not be mistaken for a simple call to enact vengeance. They rather express the hope of the ultimate fulfillment of divine justice so that "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (*lada'at et kevod Hashem*)" (Hab. 2:14).

2.2 Revelation: Torah

Discerning biblical etymologies eventually reveals (pun intended!) a variety of different revelatory experiences. Yet for Judaism, none seems to be as determining and decisive as the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Moreover, both 'Torah' and 'Mount Sinai' have become somewhat synonymous with revelation.

As outlined before, the Torah not only acts as a mere medium of revelation, but is also a material manifestation of the divine will. It represents both a) an immediate revelatory experience (communicated directly by God to Moses, but at the same time also immediately witnessed by all Israelites present at Mount Sinai) as well as b) a mediate one (the Torah as a textual medium allows the generations following the events at Mount Sinai through its reading and study to take part in them). Analogously, the Torah a) stands for a momentary act of revelation (namely the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19–20), but it also b) acts as a supratemporal medium, which guarantees the continuity of that which was the revealed (Deut. 5:27 ff.). Unlike the other books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah does not simply convey a specific vision or prophecy revealed to a particular prophet in certain historical context; it extends beyond the mediatorship of Moses (Exod. 19–24), being addressed to all of Israel (Deut. 5).

2.3 Reception: The "Giving of the Torah" (*matan Torah*)

While there is no classical Hebrew word for "revelation", various concepts exist in Jewish tradition to express and label the act of revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai: It is usually described as *matan Torah* (literally "giving of the Torah") or *qabbalat Torah* (literally "receiving of the Torah"), emphasizing the unique relationship and bond between God and the Israelites. Another commonly used expression is *ma'amad har Sinay* (literally "standing at Mount Sinai"), which is particularly found in medieval Jewish philosophical literature (e.g. Saʿadiyah Gaon, Moses Maimonides).

The Torah is conceptually considered a gift entrusted by God to Israel, symbolized in the two "tablets of stone" (*luchot ha-even/avanim*) as a materialized expression of the covenant made between them. Through the giving of the Torah, God not only reveals His will to Israel. In doing so, He also designates Israel as His chosen (people): "Now therefore, if you will listen to My voice indeed, and keep My covenant (*u-shem'artem et briti*), then you shall be My treasure (*segulah*) from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (*mamlekhet kohanim ve-goy kadosh*)" (Exod. 19:5–6). This is indicated by His coming from His place, in order to encounter the Israelites:

> 'And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God (*liqrat ha-Elokim*)' (Exod. 19:17). R. Yossi said: Yehudah would expound, and he said, 'The Lord came *from* Sinai (*mi-Sinay*)' *(Deut. 33:2)*. Do not read this (*al tiqre*), but rather: 'The Lord came *to* Sinai (*le-Sinay*)' – to give the Torah to Israel. Or perhaps you should not say this, but rather: 'The Lord came *from* Sinai (*mi-Sinay*)' – to receive Israel, like a bridegroom who goes out to meet his bride (*ke-chattan* [...] *liqrat kallah*)" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el Ba-Chodesh, Yitro* 3).

What takes place at Mount Sinai is a metaphorical marriage between God and Israel – most importantly, a voluntary one. Not only does God choose Israel, but Israel chooses God as well, as is expressed in Moses bringing the Israelites towards Him:

> "[The Lord] Came from Sinai" – He went forth towards them when they were about to take their stand at the foot of the Mount, like a bridegroom who goes out to meet his bride, as it is said, "And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God." (Exod. 19:17). This teaches us that He was Himself going out to face them. (*RaSH"Y* on Deut. 33:2)

God and Israel, bridegroom and bride, meet each other half-way, as it is customary in traditional Jewish weddings – with Moses taking on the role of the matchmaker. Correspondingly, based on the rabbinic interpretation of the verse "On

the day of his wedding (*be-yom chaltunato*)" in Song of Songs 3:11, the revelation at Mount Sinai is described as a wedding day between God and Israel (b. *Ta'anit* 26b). As a matter of fact, standing under the *chuppah* (canopy), during a Jewish wedding ceremony is both symbolically and ritually understood as a kind of re-enactment of the events at Sinai.

In His giving the Torah, God expresses His unconditional love to Israel. Israel responds by unanimously accepting His Torah: "All the people answered in one voice (*qol echad*), saying, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we will do (*na'aseh*)!'" (Exod. 24:3). Israel accepts what the rabbis call the "yoke of the *Torah* (*'ol ha-Torah*)" (*Pirqey Avot* 3:5), meaning the sole sovereignty of God's will, both willingly and unconditionally. This is affirmed a few verses later with a noticeable amendment: "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and we will hear (*na'aseh ve-nishm'a*)" (Exod. 24:7). In the rabbinical interpretation, the word *nishm'a* is often interpreted as referring to an understanding of the laws. That Israel gives 'doing' precedence over 'understanding' is an expression of their unconditional devotion love to God, for which Israel is praiseworthy (b. *Shabbat* 88a).

In another allusion to the wedding metaphor, the roles are slightly changed: Israel takes on the role of the bridegroom and the Torah becomes the intended bride: "'Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance (*morashah*) for the congregation of Jacob' (Deut. 33:4). Do not read it as inheritance (*morashah*); rather, read it as betrothed (*me'orasah*)." (b. *Pessachim* 49b).

While the relationship between God and Israel is an intimate one, it does not take place in secret. Through the giving of the Torah, it is displayed out in the open and for all to see. This actually finds a ritual expression during the synagogue prayer service when the open Torah scroll is lifted up (*hagbahah*) after the reading of the Torah: "And this is the Law which Moses set before the children of Israel" (Deut. 4:44). The Torah is a testimony of the relationship of God and Israel, which is ritually affirmed by those who bear witness during the prayer service (according to some customs emphasized by pointing the little finger at the Torah when saying "And *this* is the Torah (*ve-zot ha-Torah*) …").

But like in any relationship, even an intimate and intense one, the danger of negligence and unreliability is always given, compelling God to constantly remind Israel to treat the gift of the Torah with utmost respect:

> R. Yehoshua ben Levy said: Each and every day a heavenly voice (*bat qol*) goes out from Mount Horeb, and announces and says: 'Woe to the creatures for disparaging the *Torah*'; for anyone who does not involve himself in the *Torah* is called 'rebuked' (*nazuf*), as it is said: 'A ring of gold in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman who turns from discretion.' (Prov. 11:22) (*Pirqey Avot* 6:2).

While Israel might have become somewhat insensitive to the admonitions of the "heavenly voice", it is the rabbis who take it upon themselves to remind their fellow Jews to apprehend and appreciate that what appears to be a "yoke" is instead the gift of true freedom:

> And it says: 'And the tablets (*luchot*) were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven (*charut*) upon the tablets', (Exod. 32:16) do not read (*al tiqre*) 'graven' (*charut*) but rather 'freedom' (*cherut*), for there is no free man except one that involves himself in *Torah* learning; And anyone who involves himself in *Torah* learning is elevated, as it is said: 'and from *Mattanah* (a place whose name literally means 'gift', and correspondingly can refer to the giving of the *Torah*) [to] *Nachaliel*; and from *Nachaliel* [to] *Bamot* (a place whose name literally meaning 'high places')' (Numbers 21:19)" (*Pirqey Avot* 6:2).

In other words: The *Torah*, as a gift given from a higher place, actually allows for true interpretative freedom, lifting oneself from the bounds and constrictions of the "yoke of government and the yoke of the way of the world (*'ol makhut ve-'ol derekh eretz*)" (*Pirqey Avot* 3:5); it enables one to elevate oneself to 'high(er) places,' in order to come and be near to God.

2.4 Experience: "Seeing voices"

"And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were [thunderous] sounds and lightnings (*qolot u-verakim*), and a thick cloud upon the mountain and the sound of a horn (*qol shofar*) exceedingly loud, so that all the people in the camp trembled" (Exod. 19:16). The imminent encounter between God and His chosen people takes place in what is described as a dramatic and even terrifying atmosphere, accompanied by thunder and lightning, fire and smoke. It is a tangible experience, affecting and challenging all senses. In this built-up tension, God eventually reveals Himself to Israel: "And God spoke all these words, saying" (Exod. 20:1).

However, according to the classic rabbinic interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites were only able to hear the first two commandments:

> R. Simlay taught: There were 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) stated to Moses in the *Torah*, consisting of 365 prohibitions corresponding to the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive commandments (*'aseh*) corresponding to the number of a person's limbs. Rav Chamnuna said: What is the verse [that alludes to this]? It is written: "Moses commanded to us the *Torah*, an inheritance" (Deuteronomy 33:4). The word *Torah*, in terms of its numerical value (*gimatriyya*) is 611. In addition, there are [two other commandments]: "I am (*anokhi*) [the Lord your God]" and: "You shall have no (*lo yehiyeh lekha*)

> [other gods]" (Exodus 20:2, 3), that we heard from the mouth of the Almighty, for a total of 613. (b. *Makkot* 23b–24a)

To illustrate this point, I would like to make use of the classical rabbinic hermeneutical method of *Gematria*, which has risen to popular prominence due to its use in the context of *Qabbalah* and other Jewish mystical traditions. In *Gematria*, every Hebrew letter is assigned a specific numerical value, and through the combination of letters and their respective numeric values one can construe numerical identities in certain words. In the case of the letters comprising the word *Torah*/תורה it is *tav* (400) + *vav* (6) + *resh* (200) + *he* (5) add up to 611. Correspondingly Rav Chamnuna concludes that Moses taught Israel 611 commandments and that the two additional commandments were received directly from God, namely the first two of the Ten Commandments, adding up to a total of 613 commandments (תרי״ג/*TaRY"aG ha-mitzvot*). This implies that, while Moses understands what follows from God's words clearly, the experience of God 'speaking' appears to completely overwhelm the visual and auditory senses of the Israelites: "And all the people saw the sounds/voice(s) (*ve-kol ha-'am ro'im et ha-qolot*), and the lightnings, and the sound of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood afar off." (Exod. 20:15). The immediateness of the God encounter appears to evoke a state of cognitive confusion, or else how can one possibly 'see' sounds or voices?

Two possible explanations with radically different outlooks can be taken from a famous disagreement (*makhloqet*) between R. Yishma'el and R. Aqiva:

> "And all the people saw the sounds, and the lightnings" (Exodus 20:15). "They saw what was visible and heard what was audible". These are the words of R. Yishma'el. R. Akiqa says: "They saw and heard what was audible. There was nothing that left the mouth of the Almighty (*mi-pi ha-Gevurah*) which was not engraved (*nechtzav*) on the tablets, as it is written: 'The voice of the Lord (*qol Hashem*) hews/engraves (*chotzev*) (with) flames of fire.' (Psalm 29:7). (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el*, *Ba-chodesh*, *Yitro* 9)

R. Yishma'el articulates a position that is commonly characterized as a 'naturalist' one by stating what cognitively makes sense. R. Aqiva, on the other hand, emphasizes the 'super-naturalist' aspects of the experience, suggesting that it is that very 'super-naturalism' which authenticates revelation.

The question of what was actually heard and seen at Sinai continued to puzzle medieval Jewish Bible commentators as well. In their interpretative endeavors they argumentatively followed in the respective footsteps of R. Yishma'el and R. Aqiva, developing them further. For example, the medieval Bible commentator R. Shlomoh Yitzchaki of Troyes (1040 – 1105), better known by his acronym *RaSH"Y*, interprets Exodus 20:15 as follows: "'They saw the sounds/

voice(s)' (*ro'im et ha-qolot*) – they saw that which should be heard, something which is impossible to see" (*RaSH"Y* on Exod. 20:15). In his opinion, the experience at Sinai proves incomprehensible to the Israelites. On the other hand, the Italian Bible commentator R. Ovadyah Sforno (ca. 1475–1550) concludes that the word

> "they saw/seeing (*ro'im*)" [is to be understood] like [the same word in] "and my heart saw (*ve-libi ra'ah*) [many things of wisdom and of knowledge]" (Ecclesiastes 1:16). [It means] that they understood the meaning of these sounds (*hitbonenu 'inyan ha-qolot*). (Sforno on Exodus 20:15)

For R. Sforno, *r-'-h* ("seeing") actually appears to be conceptually synonymous with *y-d-'* ("knowing") in these verses. A similar understanding appears to be expressed in the verse "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of the words but you perceived no shape – nothing but a voice" (Deut. 4:12), suggesting that what is implied here is the Israelites' inability to see God, for such an experience would prove fatal: "You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live" (Exod. 33:20).

But what is furthermore peculiar in this context is the use of participial form of *r-'-h*, '*ro'im*', instead of the usual past tense. It could be translated as "they see", suggesting that their experience is, as a matter of fact, processual rather than momentary. So while in the end it remains unclear what the Israelites actually experienced at Mount Sinai, we can conclude that it proved both overpowering and transformative, resonating in them and the generations that followed.

2.5 Presence: "A Great Voice and It Did Not Cease" (*qol gadol ve-lo yasaf*)

A crucial question for the rabbis is their concern about the consequences of the Sinaitic experience: Is the Torah given a perfect entity? And if so, would that not suggest that the revelation at Sinai was just a one-time event? Or does it mark rather an ongoing endeavor, which allows humans to actively engage and creatively contribute to the process of ever-perfecting that which was revealed at Sinai?[18] At the core of their respective discussions is the interpretation of the following verse: "These things the Lord spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain, [...] a great voice and it did not cease (*qol gadol ve-lo yasaf*)" (Deut. 5:19).

18 For a detailed discussion, see Silman, Yochanan, *Qol gadol ve-lo yasaf – Torat yisrael beyn shlemut le-hishtalmut*, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1999.

How can the cryptic phrase “and it did not cease” be understood? Does it simply mean that the volume of the divine voice that did not decrease, thus affecting anyone present at Sinai? Or does it imply that it continued to resonate beyond the actual concrete moment of revelation?

The Torah clearly states that “*You shall not add (lo tosifu) to that which I command you, and you shall not subtract (ve-lo tigreʿu) from it, to keep the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I command you” (Deut. 4:2), suggesting that everything what God intended to be revealed was actually revealed in the Torah. In other words: The Torah given at Sinai is perfect*. The rabbis consequently argued that future prophecies did not add anything to what was revealed at Mount Sinai; rather, the Sinaitic experience indeed contained all future prophecies: “And God said all of these things, saying” (Exod. 20:1). R. Yitzchak said:

> What the prophets were to prophesize in the future in each generation (*be-khol dor va-dor*), they received from Mount Sinai (*qiblu me-har Sinay*). As Moses said to Israel: “But with those here with us standing today and with those not here with us today.” (Deut. 29:14). It does not say [at the end of the verse], “with us standing today (*‘immanu ‘omed ha-yom*)”, but rather, “with us today (*‘immanu ha-yom*)”; these are the souls that will be created in the future, who do not have substance, about whom “standing” is not mentioned. [...] Isaiah said: “[F]rom the time it was, I was there.” (Isa. 48:16). Isaiah (meant to say) “From the time the *Torah* was given at Sinai, ‘I was there’ and received this prophecy”, “and now the Lord God did send me and His spirit” (Isa. 48:16), [meaning] until now, he was not given permission to prophesize. (*Exodus Rabbah* 28:6)

In other words: Isaiah’s prophecy, though articulated for a particular time and circumstance, was already included in the revelation of Mount Sinai; however, it was not destined to be revealed until its designated time had come, making Isaiah somewhat like a prophetic ‘sleeper agent.’ Moreover, Isaiah “was there”, anachronistically receiving his prophecy at Sinai. The Sinaitic revelation is not just a singular moment in history; as a matter of fact it transcends any defining local and temporal dimensions. For the rabbis, however, this extends well beyond the prophecies of the prophets; they actually equate the knowledge of the rabbinic sages with prophetic inspiration: “And it was not only of the prophets who receive their prophecy from Sinai, but also the sages who arise in each generation – each of them received what was his from Sinai. So it states: ‘These things the Lord spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain, [...] a great voice and it did not cease.’ (Deuteronomy 5:19).” (*Exodus Rabbah* 28:6).

The “great voice [that] did not cease” resonates in the opinions and decisions of the rabbis, which like the prophecies of the prophets are directly derived from Sinai, as both “were there”. If we move beyond the literal reading of the *midrash*, we can conclude two things: a) the rabbis are on the same level as

the prophets and are consequently the latter's legitimate successors as interpreters and conveyors of the divine will; and b) "being there" might suggest that the rabbis are claiming here that when they are engaged in their interpretative endeavors, they "are" at Sinai by relating the Sinaitic revelation to their actual circumstances, making the "great voice" present.

Another *midrash* develops this idea even further:

> Not only the prophets (*ha-nevi'im*) but also all the wise men (*kol ha-chakhamim*) who were there, and those who were destined to come [received their inspiration at Sinai], as it is said: 'These things the Lord spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain, [...] a great voice and it did not cease.' (Deut. 5:19). What is meant by a 'great voice and it did not cease'? Our sages said: The entire Ten Commandments (*aseret ha-dibrot kulan*) came forth from the mouth of the Almighty (*mi-pi ha-Gevurah*) in sound/voice *(be-qol*)" (*Midrash Tanchuma, Yitro* 11:2).

The *midrash* establishes a link between the divine voice and the giving of the Ten Commandments, suggesting that everything was already contained in the utterance of the Ten Commandments. While the Ten Commandments are not identical to the 613 commandments, they are indeed representative of them. To elucidate this, we again make use of some simple *gematric* calculations: As we have seen above, every Hebrew letter corresponds to a specific numerical value. We already know that the number 613 is written in Hebrew תרי״ג – *tav* (400) + *resh* (200) + *yud* (10) + *gimmel* (3). In simple *gematric* additions, the tens and hundreds can be dropped, making the equation 4 + 2 + 1 + 3 = 10. The number 10 corresponds to the numerical value of the letter י, the first letter of the "ineffable name of God" (*shem ha-meforash*). Through the letter/number י/10, God reveals Himself in a revelation that contains everything as represented by 613 commandments, even their interpretations:

> "And the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying" (Lev. 25:1): Why is *shemitah* (the section on the Sabbatical year) juxtaposed with Mount Sinai? Were not all the commandments (*mitzvot*) given at Sinai? [The purpose of the juxtaposition is to indicate that] just as the general rules and specifications (*kelalutiah ve-diqduqiah*) [of *shemitah*] were enunciated at Sinai, so with the general rules and specifications of all [the commandments]. (*Sifra Be-Har* 1:1)

However, the discussion in *Exodus Rabbah* opens up an even broader perspective, as it expands not only what was revealed but to whom it was revealed as well: "R. Yochanan said, 'One voice was split into seven voices and they were divided into seventy languages'" (*Exodus Rabbah* 28:6). The seventy languages correspond to the seventy nations that descended from Noah (Gen. 10) – that is all of humankind. R. Yochanan thus stresses the universality of the Sinaitic

revelation, as through the giving of the Ten Commandments, the "great voice" actually reached out to all of humanity. This, however, comes with a devastating effect:

> R. Yochanan said: "The voice would go out and divide into seventy voices for the seventy languages, so that all the nations would hear. And each and every nation would hear in the language of the nation (*bi-lshon ha-ummah*) and their souls would depart. But Israel would hear and they were not injured." How did the voice go out? R. Tanchuma said, "It would come and go with two faces; [one] would kill the idolaters who did not accept it, and [one] would give life to Israel that did accept it." This is what Moses stated to them at the end of the forty years. "For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?" (Deut. 5:22). You would hear His voice and live, but the idolaters heard and died. (*Exodus Rabbah* 5:9)

Due to their unconditional acceptance of the Torah, finding a literary expression both in Exodus 24:3 and Exodus 24:7, the Israelites are collectively able to withstand the immense power of the divine voice unharmed. Moreover, the rabbis make an interesting differentiation concerning how the people experienced this moment of revelation:

> Come and see how the voice would go out among all of Israel, each and every one according to his strength (*lefi kocho*): The elders according to their strength; the young men according to their strength; the infants according to their strength; the sucklings according to their strength; the women according to their strength; and even Moses according to his strength, as it is stated: "Moses would speak and God would answer him with a voice (*be-qol*)" (Exodus 19:19), with a voice that He could withstand. And so [too,] it states: "The voice of the Lord is in strength (*ba-koach*)". (Psalm 29:4). It is not stated, "in His strength (*be-kocho*)", but rather "in strength (*ba-koach*)"; in the strength of each and every one, and even the pregnant women, according to their strength. (*Exodus Rabbah* 5:9)

Counter to the impression one could get from the dramatic built-up in Exodus 19:16 ff., the divine voice did not overpower the Israelites, but rather held back by conveying to each of them only what he or she was able comprehend and digest according to his or her respective mental and physical capacities. The *midrash* articulates a remarkable awareness of the individual experience within the collective experience at Sinai.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, we encounter yet another interesting aspect of characterizing the revelation at Mount Sinai as an overall 'transcending' event. The rabbinic discussion revolves around the status of the book of Esther (*megillat Esther*) as a canonical book. Analogously to what we have seen concerning the prophets and the rabbis, the latter make a striking argument that even the historical experience of the Jews was already included in the revelation at Sinai:

> Rav and R. Chaninah and R. Yochanan and Bar Kapara and R. Yehoshua ben Levy said, "This *megillah* was given to Moses from Sinai, however there is no [chronological sequence] in the *Torah*." R. Yochanan and R. Shimon ben Laqish (however disagreed about the following matter): R. Yochanan said, "The *Prophets* (*nevi'im*) and the *Writings* (*ketuvim*) will be nullified in the future, but the Five Books of the *Torah* will not be nullified in the future. What is the reason? (Because it is written:) 'a great voice and it did not cease' (Deuteronomy 5:19)" R. Shimon ben Laqish said, "Also the *megillah* of Esther and the laws (*halakhot*) will not be nullified in the future; it states here, 'a great voice and it did not cease' and it states later, 'and their memory did not cease (*ve-zikhram lo yasuf*)' (Esther 9:28); the Laws, [as it is written,] 'His ways (*halikhot*) are forever (*olam*) (Habakuk 3:6).'" (j. *Megillah* I 5 (7a)).

Through the words *yasaf* – *yasuf*, R. Shimon ben Laqish establishes an inter-textual connection between the Torah and the book of Esther – between a book that contains the revelation of God and a book wherein God's name is not even mentioned once (apart from the rabbinic interpretation of "from another place (*mi-makom acher*)" in Esther 4:14).

2.6 Content: What Was Revealed?

What exactly was revealed at Mount Sinai? From a close reading of the biblical text we can discern the following things: At the core of the revelation and transmission of the *Torah* at Mount Sinai are the two "tablets of stone" (*luchot ha-even/avanim*), also referred to as "the tablets of the covenant" (*luchot ha-brit*) (Exod. 34:1) or "tablets of the testimony" (*luchot ha-edut*)" (Exod. 31:18): "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Come up to Me unto the mountain and be there; and I will give you the tables of stone, and the law and the commandment (*ve-ha-torah ve-ha-mitzvah*), which I have written, that you may teach them'" (Exod. 24:12). In the context of the revelation at Mount Sinai "the law and the commandment" has been commonly interpreted as referring to the Ten Commandments (biblical *'aseret ha-devarim*; Mishnaic *'aseret ha-dibbrot*) that were written on the stone tablets. In the opinion of R. Chanina ben Gamliel, each tablet contained five commandments: "How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on the other [...] (But) the sages say: Ten on one tablet and ten on the other" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el*, *Ba-chodesh*, *Yitro* 8).

RaSH"Y concluded that the two stone tablets not only contained the Ten Commandments, but all of the 613 commandments (*RaSH"Y* on Exod. 24:12). It is, however, interesting to note that the Torah actually indicates that not everything was revealed at Mount Sinai: Rather, some laws and instructions were actually given beforehand (Exod. 12:24), while others followed after the events at Mount Sinai had transpired (Num. 36:13).

Nevertheless, some classical rabbinic sources go even further, concluding not only that the Torah given to Moses at Mount Sinai encompassed the Five Books of Moses, the *Chumash* or Pentateuch, but that God in fact taught Moses the following order: The Scriptures, the *Mishnah*, the *Talmud*, the *Tosefta*, and the *Aggadah* (*Exodus Rabbah* 47:1; j. *Peah* II:6 (17a)). In an explication of above mentioned verse from Exodus 24:12, the rabbis try to actually identify these works within the biblical text:

> R. Levy Bar Chama said that R. Shimon Ben Laqish said: Why does it say: "And I will give you the tables of stone and the law and the commandment (*ve-ha-torah ve-ha-mitzvah*), which I have written, that you may teach them." (Exodus 24:12). "The tablets" – these are the Ten Commandments. "*Torah*" – this is the Scriptures (*miqra*). And the commandment – this is the *Mishnah*. "That I have written" – these are the Prophets and the Writings. "[To] teach them" – this is the *Gemara*. This teaches you that all of them were given (*shekulam natnu*) to Moses on Sinai. (b. *Berakhot* 5a)

In other words: The Torah revealed at Mount Sinai already contained all its future potential interpretations. This implicit unity between the Torah and its commentaries, between text and interpretation, is characteristic for rabbinic Judaism. It conceptually distinguishes between "*Written Torah*" *(torah she-bi-khtav*) and "*Oral Torah*" (*torah she-be-al-peh*) which both were given at Mount Sinai, as the biblical text itself actually refers to the Torah in plural:

> These are the statues (*ha-chuqqim*) and the ordinances (*ha-mishpatim*) and the laws/*ha-Torot*" (Leviticus 26:46). "The statutes" – these are the *midrashic* interpretations (*ha-midrashot*); "and the ordinances" – these are the judgements (*ha-dinim*). "And the *Torot*" – this teaches that two *Torot* were given to Israel: One written (*bi-khtav*) and one oral (*be-'al-peh*). (*Sifra Be-Chuqqotai* 8:12)

Throughout *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, the idea of the two *Torot* (pl. of *Torah*) given at Mount Sinai is often an emphasized motif. For example, when a gentile asks Shammay, one of the central rabbinic authorities of his time, how many *Torot* Israel has, the latter answers: "Two: *Written Torah* and *Oral Torah*" (b. *Shabbat* 31a). The idea of the two *Torot*, of *Written* and *Oral Torah*, is fundamental for rabbinic self-understanding in the Pharisaic tradition; the rejection of the *Oral Torah* by rival groups like the Sadducees is legally classified as *minut* (heresy).

However, not all rabbinical authorities seem to share the idea of the two *Torot*. In a famous passage in *Sifra*, a *halakhic midrash* to Leviticus, R. Aqiva acts rather astonished by the suggestion that Israel has two *Torot:*

> Did Israel have only two *Torot?* Where not many *Torot* given to them? "This is the *Torah* of the burnt-offering" (Leviticus 6:2); "This is the *Torah* of the meal offering" (Leviticus 6:7);

> "This is the *Torah* of the guilt-offering" (Leviticus 7:1) [...] Moses merited becoming the messenger (*shaliach*) between Israel and their Father in heaven, "on Mount Sinai by the hand of Moses (*be-har Sinay be-yad Mosheh*)" (Leviticus 26:46). We are hereby taught that the (entire) *Torah* – (together with) its halakhot and its specifications and its interpretations (*halakhotiah ve-diqduqiah u-perushiah*) – was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. (*Sifra Be-Chuqqotai* 8:10; cf. b. *Nedarim* 25a)

What R. Aqiva essentially argues here is that, rather than conceptually being two *Torot*, there is actually only one Torah, which contains all its potential interpretations. I have to add here that R. Aqiva is not just 'another' rabbi who voices his opinion, but rather *the* leading legal authority of his time, best illustrated in the following rabbinic story: When Moses witnessed how God prepared the Torah by "tying crowns[19] on the letters" (*ve-qosher ketarim la-otiot*), he asks Him for the reason therefore. God answers that in the future a certain R. Aqiva will deduce laws from them. He even transports Moses into the future, into the study hall where R. Aqiva is expounding the Law and discussing it with his students. Moses, however, is unable to follow the discussion. Yet when one student asks R. Aqiva from where he derived his conclusions, he explains – much to Moses' relief – that this is a "law of Moses from Sinai (*halakhah le-Mosheh mi-Sinay*)" (b. *Menachot* 29b).

A similar opinion to the one of R. Aqiva about the 'all-inclusiveness' of the Torah is expressed in another *halakhic midrash:*[20]

> We are hereby taught that the Word (*ha-dibbur*) left the mouth of the Holy One, blessed is He, and Israel perceived it (*mistaklim bo*) and knew how many *midrashim* it contained, how many *halakhot* it contained, how many leniencies and stringencies (*qalim ve-chamurim*) it contained and how many verbal analogies (*gezeyrot shavot*) it contained." (*Sifrey Deuteronomy* § 313)

This, furthermore, underlines that the *Written Torah* and *Oral Torah*, according to rabbinic conceptions, indeed build a unity, comparable to a blueprint coming with its detailed instructions.

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19 A special scribal feature referred to *keter* (plural *keterim*) in Hebrew or *tag* (plural *tagin*) in Aramaic resembling little decorative crowns that can be found on certain Hebrew letters (*gimel*, *zayin*, *tet*, *nun*, *ayn*, *tzady* and *shin*).

20 Langer, Gerhard, *Midrasch*, Tübingen: UTB (Mohr Siebeck), 2016, 42.

2.7 Authorship: The "Torah of Moses" (*Torat Moshe*)?

While the Torah is also commonly referred to as "Law of the Lord (*Torat Hashem*)" (Exod. 13:9; Ps. 19:8), indicating God's ownership of the Torah, in other books of the Hebrew Bible the phrase "Law of Moses (*Torat Mosheh*)" is found (Josh. 8:31; Mal. 3:22). The two phrases are apparently at odds with each other, as both could be understood as having competing claims of authorship and authority. Accordingly, the rabbis raise the question regarding what exact role Moses did play in the revelation at Mount Sinai. They seem particularly concerned with the question of how exactly God transmitted the Torah to Moses. As a matter of fact, not only one but various opinions are offered – for example, that God taught Moses the Torah (b. *Nedarim* 38a; b. *Menachot* 29a), Moses received a written copy (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:14; b. *Megillah* 19b; b. *Nedarim* 38a), or that God dictated the Torah to Moses and that the latter acted as a scribe and author: "And who wrote them [i.e. the books of the *TaNa"Kh*]? Moses wrote his own book (*sifro*) [i.e. the Torah] and the portion of Balaam and the book of Job" (b. *Bava Batra* 14b; cf. b. *Bava Batra* 15a; b. *Gittin* 60a; *Sifrey Deuteronomy* § 34).

In a somewhat apologetic, but decisive, undertone R. Yehoshuah ben Levy prominently stated that the designation "Torah of Moses" by no means implies any kind of original authorship on Moses' part (b. *Shabbat* 89a). However, to speak of the "Torah of Moses" is according to another *midrashic* interpretation quite legitimate, as it actually refers to the second set of stone tablets that were exclusively given to Moses (*Exodus Rabbah* 47:3).

2.8 Origins I: The "Torah (is) from Sinai" (*Torah mi-Sinay*)

Besides questions of how the act of revelation actually occurred and what exactly was revealed, the rabbinic tradition gives equal importance to where the revelation of the Torah took place. In the phrase "Moses received the Torah from Sinai (*Mosheh qibbel Torah mi-Sinay*)" (*Pirqey Avot* 1:1), the rabbis emphasize the significance of Sinai as the origin of both the *Written Torah* and the *Oral Torah*. Yet, why at Sinai? What makes this particular place so special?

A careful reader might have noted that I worded my translation as 'Sinai' instead of 'Mount Sinai.' While 'Sinai' in above quote from *Pirqey Avot* surly refers to Mount Sinai, the biblical text sets a more complex stage of where the revelation took place: Following their flight from Egypt, the Israelites eventually come into the "wilderness of Sinai (*midbar Sinay*)", where they set camp "before the mountain (*neged ha-har*)" (Exod. 19:1–2). Only several verses later this mountain

is referred to as "Mount Sinai (*har Sinay*)" (Exod. 19:11) and henceforth designated as the site where the giving of the Torah will occur. So Sinai can actually refer to two places: The wilderness of Sinai and Mount Sinai.

Let us first take a closer look at the wilderness of Sinai: According to a famous *midrash*, the Torah was revealed in the wilderness of Sinai, because the wilderness is considered "ownerless (*hefker*)". Being ownerless seems to be the ontological default setting in order to be able to acquire something: "Unless one does make himself ownerless like the wilderness (*ke-midbar hefker*), he will be unable to acquire the wisdom and the Torah (*eyno yakhol liknot et ha-chokhmah ve-ha-torah*)." (*Numbers Rabbah* 1:7). In other words: True acceptance requires that one has to voluntarily accept something, meaning the Israelites have to shed and leave behind their slave mentality from Egypt in order to be able to voluntarily accept God as their new master – and, accordingly, to accept His will as expressed in the Torah.

But freedom of any bonds as a prerequisite for accepting the Torah has another important connotation to it: Because the Torah was given in a place that belongs to no one, no one people or nation can stake a claim to it. In other words, the Torah is not a national property. Moreover, had the Torah been revealed in the land of Israel, it would have been tied to that particular place, implying that it is valid only within its boundaries. Furthermore, the fact that the revelation takes place in the wilderness – a place not defined by any boundaries – underscores its universal validity. This finds its expression in a famous *midrash*, wherein God actually offers His Torah to other nations first, but one by one they reject it: The Romans (*Esav*) because they have a problem with the prohibition against murder; the Ammonites and Moabites because they have a problem with the prohibition against adultery; the Arabs (*Ishmael*) because they have a problem with the prohibition against stealing. (So much for prejudices and stereotypes.) After He asked all the other nations, who all find something unacceptable for themselves, God finally turns to the Israelites who "accepted the *Torah* with all its specifications and its interpretations (*kiblu et ha-torah be-diq duqeyah u-be-perusheyah*)" (*Sifrey Deuteronomy* § 343). However, according to another well-known rabbinic story, their acceptance is not as voluntary as thought: In a demonstration of His power and might, God lifts up the whole mountain and threatens Israel into accepting His Torah:

> "[A]nd they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). [...] This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above (the Israelites) like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the *Torah*, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial! (b. *Shabbat* 88a)

Just as the surrounding wilderness is pretty much a no-man's-land, Mount Sinai is according to a *midrash* pretty much what can be called a no-name-place. Nevertheless, God disregarded all other mountains and hills for the lowliest and most insignificant of mountains, namely Mount Sinai, to rest His "divine presence" (*shekhinah*) upon it. "[A]nd He did not choose to raise Mount Sinai up" (b. *Sotah* 5a), meaning that God lowered Himself down to the level of the mountain. The way Mount Sinai is characterized here reminds one of the humbleness of Moses, who like Mount Sinai at first appears to be an unlikely candidate to act as God's chosen prophet –an outsider regarding his royal Egyptian upbringing, married to a Midianite wife, and impaired by a stutter. The analogy between the two is furthermore underscored, as in the same *sugiah* (Talmudic discussion) a reference to Moses' first encounter with God is made: "And He disregarded all of the beautiful trees and rested His divine presence on the bush" (ibd.). It is, therefore, not surprising that Mount Sinai is identified with Mount Horeb, the "mountain of God (*har ha-Elokim*)" and very site where the episode of the burning bush took place (Exod. 3:1; cf. Mal. 3:22; b. *Shabbat* 89a; *Pirqey de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 51). In that respect, Mount Sinai marks the return to the very place from where the story of the Exodus began. Full circle. It is, however, noteworthy that while Mount Sinai plays of central role in the Pentateuch as well as in rabbinic literature, any mentions and references to it are relatively scarce in other books of the Hebrew Bible (Neh. 9:13; Mal. 3:22; Judg. 5:4–5; Ps. 68:9).

Still, one can also observe a change of attitude towards the significance of Mount Sinai within the different rabbinic generations: Particularly the rabbis of the Tannaitic period (1st–3rd century CE) appear to take a more critical stance in designating (Mount) Sinai as the origin of revelation,[21] as it is also the place of Israel's failing to recognize and worship God as its sole savior and sovereign in the episode of the so-called "golden calf (*'egel ha-zahav*)": "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." (Ex. 32:4).[22]

21 Halivni, David Weiss, *Revelation Restored. Divine Writ and Critical Responses*, Boulder, CL: Westview Press, 1997, 56–57.

22 Mandelbaum, Irving J., "Tannatic Exegesis of the Golden Calf Episode," in: Philip R. Davies/ Richard T. White (eds), *A Tribute to Geza Vermes. Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History*, 207–223, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990; see also Marmorstein, Arthur, *Studies in Jewish Theology. The Marmorstein Memorial Volume*, ed. by Joseph Rabbinowitz/Meyer S. Lew, London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 198–206.

2.9 Origins II: The “*Torah* (is) from heaven” (*Torah min ha-shamayim*)

The rather negative attitude of the Tannaitic rabbis might have eventually led them to come up with a different origin story altogether. According to a prominent statement in *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1, “[a]ll of Israel has a share in the world to come”. There are, however, the usual exceptions to the rule: Among the Israelites who have no share in in the world to come are those who openly deny that the “*Torah* (is) from heaven (*Torah min ha-shamayim*)” (b. *Avodah Zarah* 18a). This is further explicated in the *Gemara*, the rabbinic commentary on the *Mishnah*, which points to a *baraita* or “outside” teaching:

> The sages have taught: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord and violated His commandment, that person shall be cut off” (Numbers 15:31) – this refers to one who says that the *Torah* (is) not from Heaven. [...] It has been taught in a *baraita* [dissenting opinion]: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord” – this refers to one who says that the *Torah* (is) not from Heaven, and even if he said that the entire *Torah* (is) from Heaven except for one verse which was not said by God but by Moses himself, it is said of him: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord”. (b. *Sanhedrin* 99a; *Sifrey Numbers* § 112)

In other words: Even one verse attributed to Moses suggests a denial of the divine origin of the Torah.

The phrase “*Torah* (is) from Heaven” has a textual basis in the Torah, as refers to the verse: “I spoke to you from the Heavens” (Exod. 20:18).[23] But this concept it is not only concerned with divine origin and authorship; it moreover implies that every single verse, every single word, and even every single letter is indeed an articulation of God. While this claim sounds quite dogmatic and inflexible at first, there seems to be a profound rationale behind it: It not only allows but rather makes it necessary for the rabbis as interpreters of the divine articulation to discern its deeper meanings. In doing so, they need to move beyond the mere literality of the biblical text.

The concept that “*Torah* (is) from heaven” is, moreover, not only limited to the *Written Torah*, but extends to the *Oral Torah* as well. It comes to no surprise that the formulation “All of Israel has a share in the world to come” is also found at the beginning of *Pirqey Avot*, which, as mentioned earlier, is giving an account of the rightful process of the transmission of the *Oral Torah* through which the legitimacy of the rabbinic tradition is established. Accordingly, denying that

23 Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *Heavenly Torah. As Refracted Through the Generations*, ed. and transl. by Gordon Tucker/Leonard Levin, New York: Continuum, 2006, 59.

the "*Torah* (is) from heaven" not only defies its divine origin, but doing so challenges the legitimacy of the rabbinic tradition as well.

Still it would be too narrow to reduce this concept to a mere question of authority and legitimacy. That the "*Torah* (is) from heaven" also has an epistemological dimension, as the divine knowledge convoyed in the giving of the Torah supposedly allows for a deeper insight into the nature of things. I would like to illustrate this with a rabbinic rationalization of why the Torah must be of divine origin: When discussing the camel, the hare, and the hyrax, whose features are difficult to discern regarding their classification as *kosher* or non-*kosher* animals, Rav Chanan bar Rava argues: "But was Moses our teacher a hunter or was he an archer? From here there is a refutation to those who say that the *Torah* (is) not from Heaven!" (b. Chullin 60b). In other words: How could Moses possibly have possessed such a complex knowledge about the nature of animals unless he had gained it from a superior source of knowledge – the 'Heavenly Torah'? As simple as Rav Chanan bar Rava's argument might sound at first, there is indeed a deeper logic behind it: Not only does the Torah teach that reality is structured, but it enables one to acquire an insight and an understanding of the structures of reality. This means not simply to perceive how things appear to us and then act upon it, but rather to cognize how they really are.

3 Aspects and Principles

The rabbinic tradition defines itself by approaching revelation through interpretation or by commenting on it, thereby revealing new facets and aspects to peruse and to pursue. This, however, makes it at the same time rather difficult to pick and choose from, considering the possible paths that one can explore. Based on some of the rabbinic ideas and concepts discussed above, I would like now to take a closer look at four aspects that have been eventually developed into fundamental concepts and principles themselves. They all concern a traditional Jewish understanding of revelation and how to live in accordance with it.

3.1 Decision-Making: "She Is Not In Heaven!"

The doctrine of the divine origin of the Torah establishes the authority and verity of God's authorship. Yet upholding it must eventually come into conflict with the authority and verity of human interpretation, posing a particular dilemma for rabbinic self-understanding. This is illustrated in the well-known and often

This is a preview. The total pages displayed will be limited.

Christoph Schwöbel

The Concept of Revelation in Christianity

1 Introduction: Contentious Foundations – the Debates on Revelation

The notion of revelation, the idea of God disclosing essential aspects of God's being, will and work to human beings, is of fundamental significance in the monotheistic religions. Everything in the practice and theoretical reflection of religion, in its life of worship and in the ethical orientation it offers, depends on God communicating with human creatures and granting them insight into God's identity and nature, into God's purpose and will for creation and specifically for human creatures. Revelation is the condition for being granted insight into the dynamic and faithfulness of God's actions in the world through which the creator actualizes the divine purpose for creation as it is grounded in God's own being. This is the presupposition for trusting in God, for doing God's will and so to be drawn into acting according to God's purposes. In this sense, every dimension of religious life in the monotheistic religions, their form, their content and the mode of their performance can be traced back to God's communication with the creatures.

One way to describe religions is to see them as multi-dimensional wholes in which every dimension is connected to the others.[1] By distinguishing these dimensions and by exploring their interrelationship, such an approach offers a way of grasping the particularities as well the holistic character of religions. The significance of the idea of revelation becomes immediately clear when one relates the different dimensions of religions to their foundational event, which in theistic religions is seen as a communicative disclosure event establishing a relation between God, humanity and the world which provides the basic orientation for humans who trust in the God who in this way relates to them.

For all monotheistic religions the *dimension of worship* is central. In all acts of worship, in turning to God in prayer, in thanksgiving, petition and praise, in listening to God's word as promise and guidance, it is presupposed that God has disclosed himself as the one who alone is to be worshipped because God is the creator, sustainer, judge and savior of creation. Monotheistic religions are char-

1 For such a multi-dimensional approach see Smart, Ninian, *Dimensions of the Sacred. An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.

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acterized in different ways by a *narrative dimension*, principally in their sacred scriptures, in which God is identified and predicated through narratives, recounting God as relating to humans in different modes of address and through God's mighty actions. The monotheistic religions are characterized by an *experiential dimension* where the whole of human experience is shaped and oriented to the revelation of the Divine in various ways. Although the modes of experience may vary from historical to mystical experience, it is always clear that the experience of God relating to humans and to the whole world is the framework for all other human experiences, for determining their significance and for judging their value by relating them to the foundational experience of the address of God in words and events. The way in which God relates to humans is seen in the monotheistic religions as the establishment of a *community*, as shaping its structures of sociality and prescribing its way of life. This community is understood as the exemplary form of sociality that displays the features of human being in relation on the basis of their communal and individual relationship to God. This community is characterized by a specific *ethos* that is grounded in God's relationship to humans. This ethos defines the orientation of human life, by determining the possibilities of action for created agents in relation to the creator and to other creatures, in setting goals that should be strived for, by defining goods which support that orientation, by displaying virtues, conforming to God's will for humans, and identifying vices that deviate from it, and by setting up norms for a human life lived in accordance with revelation. In the monotheistic religions, revelation shapes the *aesthetics* of religion, the way reality is perceived and aesthetically shaped to make its meaning apparent. The specific aesthetics that characterize Judaism, Christianity and Islam respectively trace their particularities back to the understanding of God that is disclosed in revelation and the understanding of what it means to be human that is implied in this disclosure. Every dimension of religious life is rooted in revelation and the specific constellations of these dimensions of religious life can be followed back to the specific content and mode of revelation. Looking at the way revelation is interwoven with the fabric of religion illustrates how revelation shapes the entire religious life and forms the basis for the way believers understand the whole of reality. In monotheistic religions revelation determines the whole understanding of reality. Since the author of revelation is believed as the ground, the meaning and the goal of all reality, so that everything has to be understood in its relation to God, the scope of revelation cannot be limited. Everything can become the means and vehicle of God's revelation.

In view of the foundational role of revelation it is not surprising that the Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner states: "Wherever there is religion,

there is the claim to revelation."[2] This should, however, not obscure the fact that there are characteristic differences between theistic, monotheistic and mystical religions, and also between the different monotheistic religions. In the Eastern religions, paradigmatically in Buddhism, the emphasis is on illumination, the granting of insight, *satori* as it is called in Japanese Zen Buddhism, an inexplicable, indescribable moment of Enlightenment, comparable to the intuitive experience of Gautama Buddha under the Bo-Tree, which cannot be grasped by ordinary logic, but constitutes a new ordering of the relationship to the whole of the universe of the one who undergoes this experience. This experience is not mediated by the senses. In fact, it occurs when the senses no longer affect the experience of the one who seeks illumination. In theistic religions this emphasis on the inner experience is characteristically combined with an emphasis on manifestation in the world of experience, mediated by the senses. In monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this underlines that the God who discloses God's being, will and work is also the creator, the source of salvation and the ultimate judge of everything there is. Revelation, creation, salvation and consummation have the same author. The inner illumination of the recipient of revelation and the manifestation of God in external reality have the same ground and object, and so they are correlated in particular ways.

Because of its foundational character there have been extensive inner-religious discussions in the history of the monotheistic religions on the nature, form, content and effect of revelation.[3] Is revelation to be characterized as immediate or mediated disclosure of God? Should it be understood as direct or indirect communication? Does it occur primarily in the human person, in nature, or in history? Does revelation have the form of communicative actions in history and/or the effective communication of the divine word? What is the primary effect of revelation: Does it primarily grant insight or does it consist in offering guidance? Raising these questions already illustrates that the "or" in formulating these questions does not refer to an exclusive alternative, a complete disjunction, but rather to complementary aspects of revelation.

One of the most significant questions concerns the relationship between revelation and the witness to revelation, between the initial disclosure event and its appropriation in a history of interpretations. Is revelation an event in the past

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2 Brunner, Emil, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1941, 2nd ed. Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1961; reprint: Wuppertal: TVG Brockhaus, 2007: "Wo immer Religion is, da ist Behauptung von Offenbarung.", 31.

3 For a perceptive overview of the issues in the discussion of revelation cf. Dalferth, Ingolf U., "Understanding Revelation", in: Ingolf U. Dalferth/Michael Ch. Rodgers (eds), *Revelation. Clarment Studies in Philosophy of Religion Conference 2012*, 1–25, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

that needs to be appropriated in our respective present by interpretation and application? Does revelation refer to a present reality of experience that incorporates the past and opens up a particular view of the future? Or is revelation in the strict sense an eschatological event at the end of times so that what we have now are partial and fragmentary experiences of anticipatory disclosures? Even such a brief sketch illustrates the scope and the significance of the debates on the understanding of revelation. The foundational role of revelation in the religions is not only illustrated but also shaped by the way one responds to these questions.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam an important cluster of questions focuses on the relationship between revelation and the sacred scriptures. Are the sacred scriptures themselves revelation? How is the relationship between the author, the medium and the effect of revelation to be assessed theologically, and how is scripture to be placed in that relationship? Is scripture to be seen as the divinely authorized witness to revelation or does scripture by itself carry divine authority? How is the relationship between scripture and tradition to be interpreted? Can the tradition of interpretation be regarded as being part of revelation? Or does scripture alone have divine authority? This question has considerable weight in all three monotheistic religions. While the view of the divine authority of scripture is mostly associated with Islam, Karaite Judaism also claims that the Tanakh alone has supreme authority. In Christianity, the Reformation and its principle "Scripture alone" and the subsequent development of a doctrine of verbal inspiration has been at the center of debates within the churches of the Reformation and with other Christian churches. The "inerrancy of scripture", in its variations of absolute, full or limited inerrancy, is one of the questions where the relationship between the understanding of revelation and scripture is passionately discussed. This question which is mostly discussed in Protestant churches, has a counterpart in the question of the infallibility of the teaching office of the church, mainly discussed in the Roman Catholic church. It is closely connected to the question of who has authority in interpreting scripture which presupposes a view on the understanding of who has the authority of interpreting revelation. Is that the prerogative of particular ministries or of all believers or must God himself be seen as the ultimate interpreter of revelation and so as the final authority in interpreting revelation?

In modern times the question of the relationship of revelation and scripture or tradition is hotly debated in connection with the question of "fundamentalism". This term has its origin as the self-description of Christian groups in the United States who claimed at the beginning of the 20th century that belief in the inerrancy of scripture is the first of "five fundamentals" that characterize

true Christian faith.[4] In recent years the term has been used not only to characterize Christian groups but also, and predominantly so, strands within Islam and, to a lesser degree, in Judaism. The relationship between revelation and scripture which is at the center of these inner-religious debates and needs to be discussed theologically within each of the three monotheistic religions. Do the positions characterized as "fundamentalist" offer an authentic understanding of revelation or should they be seen as a case of "displaced foundations" since they invest scripture with an authority which only God can have as the only author, content and effect of revelation? Should the authority of Scripture be seen as strictly relative to the authority of revelation, a relation which then needs to be clarified theologically?

While these questions are at the center of *inner-religious* debates, interreligious conversations on revelation between Jews, Christians and Muslims have to take into account that in an important sense the scriptural traditions of the other form part of what is understood as revelation in one's own religion. How should Jews view the fact that the traditions of Tanakh are viewed by Christians, albeit in slightly different canonical form, as the Old Testament? How do they understand the written Tora, also claimed by Christians as an indispensable part of what constitutes the witness to revelation, in relation to the oral Torah which played a constitutive role in shaping rabbinical Judaism? And how should Christians deal with the fact that Jews see the Tanakh as their Hebrew Bible? How can both understand theologically that the Bible of Israel has two different and often conflicting histories of reception and of the use of Israel's Bible as scripture? Does this have significance for the understanding of revelation? Furthermore, how can Muslims deal with the fact that persons, events and traditions which are recorded in the Tanakh and in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament are part of the Qurʾān, although, according to the testimony of the Qurʾān, in a form that is shaped by the sending down of the Qurʾān to the prophet Muḥammad as the ultimate revelation? Again, how should Jews and Christians relate to the fact that what they see as normative and, in a sense, ultimate revelation is seen as leading on to the ultimate revelation of the Qurʾān to Muḥammad? The interrelationships between the texts being claimed as a constitutive part of revelation for each of the three monotheistic religions complicates the view of revelation in the respective inner-religious debates.

It is important to note that we do not confront the situation of the interrelationship between the Bible of Israel, the Christian Bible and the Qurʾān as a new

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4 Cf. Marty, Martin E./Appleby, R. Scott, *The Fundamentalism Project*, 5 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991–1995.

challenge. It has formed part of the critical, often polemical, but also constructive relationships between the three monotheistic religions over centuries. In medieval times, philosophy, whether of a Jewish, Muslim or Christian pedigree, was a partner in the debates, sometimes employed as a tool by each of the traditions, sometimes viewed as a relatively independent source of knowledge which has a problematical relationship to what the revelation discloses.[5] Contemporary interreligious dialogues can profit a great deal from recovering the history of the relations between the three religious and theological traditions of the monotheistic religions and their philosophical counterparts. Clarifying the differences and commonalities in the understanding of revelation is a significant part of that.

In the conversations with those outside the religious traditions, whether they describe themselves as sceptics, agnostics or as atheists, precisely the foundational character claimed for revelation is under dispute. The question of the relationship between revelation and reason accompanies the history of theological attempts at clarifying the notion of revelation. How is knowledge and insight that is constituted *for* human beings, as the religions claim, related to knowledge that is actively constituted *by* them? How are passivity and activity, receptivity and spontaneity related in human being, knowing and acting? Judaism, Christianity and Islam see human beings as capable of knowing and acting. However, they all emphasize in distinctive ways the fallibility of human knowing and the predicament of acting under conditions of deception, error and limited capacities, connected with created existence. As creatures, humans are oriented towards a truth that they have not ultimately defined for themselves. Therefore, they are as much in need of orientation as they are also capable of being misled and incapable of correcting themselves without divine help. Humans are dependent on insight that is granted to them, on knowledge that is disclosed to them and on guidance that is shown to them. The common denominator of all revelation is to provide humans with orientation which they could not find for themselves, of letting them understand the truth about the relationship in which they stand to the creator, to their fellow creatures and to themselves.

It is the very claim of revelation to show humans their right place in relation to God, to the world and to themselves and to set them on the right path in knowing and acting, that seems problematical for those outside the religious traditions. Are there any criteria by means of which claims to revelation can be judged? Or can revelation only be assessed by those who have received it? Is there a rational justification of claims to revelation? And can there be moral war-

5 Lutz-Bachmann, Matthias/Fidora, Alexander (eds): *Juden, Christen und Muslime. Religionsdialoge im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004.

rants which could provide independent reasons by means of which one could assess whether the course of life oriented by divine revelation is the right one? Can the claims to revelation be publicly adjudicated in the court of reason?

The question of whether revelation is capable of or in need of rational warrants has accompanied the history of reflection on revelation from the beginning. Time and again, it has been claimed, most notably in the European Enlightenment, that all claims to revelation are in need of confirmation by the powers of reason. Again and again, the representatives of religious traditions have questioned whether the created and fallible intellect of humans can be able to adjudicate on what is given in divine revelation. In this context it is very important to clarify the relationship of revelation to other forms of human knowing. Is revelation an exception from the natural forms of knowing, one that would deserve to be called supernatural? Is revelation reserved for religious contents and situations? Or would it be more appropriate to see revelation as the normal and natural mode of gaining knowledge and receiving orientation, the foundation on which all other knowledge and all other forms of action rest?

Many of these epistemological questions, which are discussed in the conversations between those who are committed to religious traditions and those who would not recognize such a commitment, have been discussed under the heading of "foundationalism" in philosophy.[6] Are there clear and distinct universal criteria by means of which all epistemic claims can be assessed, or are such criteria internal to particular epistemic perspectives and its inherent internal criteria? If there are no independent external criteria for assessing claims to revelation, the only possibility to gain a view of the plausibility of claims to revelation is to seek clarification in dialogical exchanges, similar to those in inter-religious conversations. It belongs to the very character of revelation that persons who believe in revelation cannot provide a justification for the state of certainty which they see as the result of revelation, because it is constituted for them. They can, however, provide an account of the content of revelation. Respecting the other's basic certainties while at the same time inviting them to provide grounds for the content of revelation or the content of rival views not based on revelation, are the two basic requirements for helping to develop the situation of religious and ideological pluralism in which we live into one of dialogical pluralism. While respect for the basic certainties people confess – the principle of the freedom of conscience – is the foundation of the freedom of religion and of interreligious toleration, the willingness to give account of the basic content

6 Audi, Robert, *Epistemology. A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2003.

of one's beliefs – the principle of dialogical accountability – should not be alien to the three religions in which the conviction that God alone knows the human heart is as central as the view that humans are responsible before God in a relationship of address and response.

2 Biblical Roots of the Concept of Revelation

The "revelation" (*revelatio*, *manifestatio*) became a technical term for the disclosure of God in the debates on the foundations of knowledge of God in the High Middle Ages. How is God's communication through external and internal means related to other means of gaining knowledge by rational inquiry (*scientia*) or through the initiation into a way of discerning the permanent order of the world in the changing circumstances of nature and history (*sapientia*)? The context of the formation of the concept of revelation is the establishment of European universities as institutions for the cultivation of knowledge in the different spheres of human interaction with reality. Religious knowledge as it is reflected in theology relates matters of temporal significance to eternal matters and orders the different areas of theoretical (philosophy) and practical knowledge (medicine, law).

The organization of the spheres of knowledge and a canon of the sciences presupposes a view of the human faculties and capacities for the cultivation of knowledge. Rational capacities in their different forms, generating theoretical, practical or empirical knowledge must be related to the human will and to the range of affections situated in the human heart. The concept of revelation was part of the attempt to determine the particular profile of knowledge of God, its foundations, content, methods and goals, and to relate it to knowledge of worldly temporal matters.

As institutions for the cultivation of knowledge, the universities, growing out of corporations of scholars, had to find their place in relation to the monastic schools, situated in convents and dedicated to the education and personal formation of clerics. Here the cultivation of theological knowledge was closely related to the life of worship, to maintaining a tradition of the transmission of religious knowledge by initiation. The sources of Christian theology, the Bible, the writings of the Fathers, the traditions of liturgy were transmitted through personal instruction, through building up and cultivating monastic libraries. Reference to revelation had its place both in the sources of the transmission of Christian knowledge as well as in the ordering of the Christian mind in connection with the formation of the person.

Both the monastic orders and the universities existed in a relationship, often characterized by significant tensions, to the institutional church and the teaching office practiced by the bishops and priests. The teaching authority of the church was seen to be based in many ways on the divine authority: by the authority of Scripture, by the authority passed on from the Apostles to those following them in office, and by the authority of dogma, formally agreed by the councils of the Church, and informally part of the tradition of the church. The appeal to divine authority bound these different sources of instruction, Scripture, tradition, dogma and apostolic teaching office together.

For the appeal to divine authority in its various forms reference to Scripture was constitutive. The plurality of ways in which the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament speak of God communicating with God's human creature, identifying himself through his name, offering guidance, pronouncing judgment or salvation is in the Middle Ages, as it were, condensed in the technical concept of "revelation". While the use of revelation as a technical term, a second order concept, summarizing and structuring the various ways of divine communication, is particularly useful for relating revelation to reason and the will, and for relating arguments from reason and appeals to the authority of Scripture, tradition and ecclesial office, it does not obliterate the plurality and variety of divine communication in Scripture. The first order expressions of divine communication in epiphanies, forms of address, and events always provided the foundation for re-adjusting the interpretation of the technical concept of revelation.

2.1 Divine Disclosure and Communication in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Hebrew Scriptures do not have a concept of revelation.[7] Divine self-disclosure is in almost all cases expressed in verbal form. A variety of verbal forms, derived from non-religious usage is employed to express forms of divine communication: *gālāh*, disclose or reveal, e. g. Gen. 35:7 God reveals himself to Jacob in Bethel; *jād*‘, proclaim, making known, e. g. Exod. 25:22 God announces that he will meet with Moses and give his commandments to Israel; also with regard to God's actions which disclose his identity: Exod. 20:1; *nāgād*, report or commu-

7 A very helpful summary of the Biblical material is provided by Dunn, James D. G., "Biblical Concepts of Revelation," in: Paul Avis (ed.), *Divine Revelation*, 1–22, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997. A detailed overview of the vocabulary employed in describing revelatory experiences can be found in Preuß, Horst Dietrich, "Offenbarung II. Altes Testament," in: Gerhard Müller (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. XXV, 117–128, Berlin/New York, 1995.

nicate, e. g. Gen. 41:25 God announces to Pharaoh what he is about to do, *dābār*, speak, e. g. Gen. 28:13 where God introduces himself to Jacob with his name and promises him the land on which he lies. In these (and many other) examples the self-communication of God occurs in the context of a narrative. God's self-communication discloses the point of the narrative and becomes the context in which all of God's actions now have to be understood. God's self-communication turns God's actions into self-communicating actions. God's self-communication identifies him as the ultimate agent in everything that happens and so distinguishes God from all other finite agents and forces. If one surveys the means of God's self-communication in the Hebrew Bible one is struck by the scope and variety of means of God's communication. The "angel of JHWH" can be a means of God's own self-disclosure, of God's presence with his people, as one through whom God guides Israel on its way through the desert and turns to the people even after they have turned away from him. God discloses his glory (*kābōd*) perhaps at first in the temple, but after its destruction God discloses his glory which has left the temple (Ezek. 11:22) to individual prophets (Ezek. 1:18) and promises the return to a new temple (Ezek. 43:1). According to Second Isaiah God will demonstrate his glory for all nations as the sovereign power over nature and history (Isa. 40:5; Ps. 115:1).

The fact that God speaks (*dābār* occurs almost 400 times with JHWH as the subject of speaking) is expressed as God addressing humans in the 1st person and enabling humans to address god in the 2nd person as "you/thou". This is the predominant form in which God establishes God's relationship with the people, announces judgment, offers guidance and promises rescue. The verbal character of God's self-communication should not be contrasted to God's mighty actions. God's speaking effects what it says and God's actions communicate what God intends. As the presence of God's self-communication the words of JHWH can be seen as well as heard. In most cases God talks through the words of a prophet, but God addresses God's people as well as individuals also without prophetic mediation. God's word is the medium of his presence, it constitutes the presence of those who are addressed by God. God's self-communicating acts distinguish God from idols. Idols remain silent.

With his self-communication God intends to establish and to shape community with the chosen people, judges and corrects them where they deny and contradicts God's will to be in communion with his people. It is often emphasized that in the Hebrew Scriptures God's self-communication should not be interpreted as a way in which "the self" of God is disclosed. To know God fully from face to face is, at best, an expression of eschatological hope. Divine self-communication in its various forms and in its diverse mediations is a real encounter with God in that it brings the ones so addressed in a real relationship with God

and not only with means of communication external to God's own being. This is sufficient for divine self-communication to establish a real community between God and his human creatures. In this community more and more will be known about God as and when the people become obedient to God's call and guidance. However, in the various strands of the traditions of the Hebrew Bible the dynamic of God's self-communication has not yet reached its goal. Only then will God be fully known and only then in the perfect communion with God's redeemed creation will creatures reach their fulfilment. There are different views in which this goal is envisaged: the rising of the glory (*kābōd*) of God over Israel so that the nations will come as pilgrims to Zion in order to be in Israel's light (Isa. 60). This can be connected with the vision of the Spirit-empowered redeemer who will preach good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives and release the prisoners from darkness (Isa. 61:1–2). It can have the form of the Lord assuming his rule over Zion so that the daughter of Zion shouts aloud and rejoices (Zeph. 3:14). It may be the vision of the judgment of God making peace between the nations so that swords are beaten into ploughshares (Mic. 4:3). This goal can be described as God taking his dwelling among his people, establishing a community where there will be no more death and every tear wiped from the eyes of the mourning (cf. Isa. 25:8; 35:10; Ezek. 37:27). God himself will answer the question that God puts the prophet when he shows him the valley of the dry bones: "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezek. 37:3). The vision of the last day, the "Day of the Lord" includes the expectation of a comprehensive enablement of all generations and of people of every social standing by God's Spirit to disclose the ultimate destiny for all nations and people:

> I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28–29)

After the dreadful events preceding the final revelation, salvation will be realized: "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said." (Joel 2:32)

2.2 God's Self-Communication in Jesus and the Early Christian Communities

In the New Testament there is a similar variety of linguistic expressions to talk of God's self-communication as in the Hebrew Bible. Verbs from the roots express-

ing visual communication *apokalýp-* reveal, *phanér-* show, *epiphaí* appear, but also expressions referring to auditory communication *legō* say, *akouō* hear and wider communicative terms *gnōrízō* know, making known, *dēlóō* lay open and, in the passive voice, *phaínoō* becoming apparent and *horáō* making seen etc., are all pressed into service to talk about God's self-communication and disclosure. The history of God's communications in word and act in Israel is presupposed so that the texts of the traditions of the Hebrew Bible are read as the means of God's continued self-communication. God's deeds are understood as part of a story that is not yet concluded and God's word is the beginning of a dynamic process of communication in which the last word has not yet been spoken. The decisive change in the writings of the New Testament is that all witnesses to divine self-communication are seen as pointing to Jesus whose message deeds and destiny are interpreted as God's ultimate self-communication, the one which has eschatological validity.[8] All communication from God after Jesus, often associated with the operation of the Holy Spirit, is concerned with actualizing, explicating and fulfilling all that is already contained in him as God's final act and ultimate word. The work of the Holy Spirit is seen as both enabling people to understand what has occurred in Jesus as anticipating and fulfilling God's comprehensive, eschatic revelation. This will complete the actualization of God's will to be in communion with creation which is from the beginning the purpose of creation. All these elements are present in the opening sentences of the Letter to the Hebrews which draws on the traditions of the Bible to present Jesus as effulgence of God's glory (*kābōd, dóxa*) and the speaker of God's word (dābār, lógos). He has this singular status as God's Son because he has overcome all obstacles for knowing God as he wants to be known, the deception of sin, of human contradiction against God's will and of turning away from his guidance.

> In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he has provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name ["the Son", cf. Ps. 2:7 and 2Sam. 7:14] he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb. 1:1–2)

8 Cf. A helpful synopsis of the exegetical and systematic problems is offered by Bauckham, Richard, "Jesus the Revelation of God," in: Paul Avis (ed.), *Divine Revelation*, 174–200, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997.

The diversity of the ways of talking about divine self-disclosure is focused in a unique way on Jesus. In the synoptic gospels Jesus is portrayed as the one who in his words, deeds and suffering inaugurates the Kingdom of God, the ultimate end of God's ways with the world (Mark 1:15; Luke 14:17–21). Reference to Jesus appears as a decisive re-focusing of ways of speaking about God's communicative action in the Hebrew Scriptures. The salvation of God's people is brought about in Jesus through God's "finger" (Luke 11:20; Exod. 8:19) as "God's Immanuel ...God with us" (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14), a turn in history that amounts to a new exodus. Jesus' message, his "new teaching" (Mark 1:17) discloses the "mysteries of the Kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11), the final turn in history where all resistance to the actualization of God's will is overcome. This is associated with Jesus' own vision that the reign of Satan is already overcome in heaven so that his defeat on earth is decided but not yet disclosed: "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning." (Luke 10:18) For Jesus followers this means: "nothing will harm you." (Luke 10:19)

The unique status of Jesus as the focus of God's self-communication which is shared by all writings of the New Testament is depicted in Luke's Gospel as rooted in a unique Father-Son relationship. Knowledge of God is bound to the self-disclosure of the Father through the Son who communicates this filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus, as the means of revelation of the Father, becomes the agent of God's self-disclosure, so that he becomes a unique means of access to knowledge of God which is not at the disposal of the wise and learned:

> At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Luke 10:21–22)

For Paul, the mystery of God's justice as creative justice makes believers just in faith, by trusting in God and his justice alone, as it is revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ. This self-disclosure establishes the perspective from which the believers can understand God's self-communication in Scripture (Rom. 1:2; 1Cor. 4:6 and 10:11) and in the world of creation (Rom. 1:19–20). God's word continues to be efficacious in Scripture and in the apostolic preaching. Paul can therefore describe the apostolic proclamation as a power from God (Rom. 1:17; 2Cor. 2:14). The revelation in Christ removes the veil which covers the face of Moses which Paul interprets in 2Cor. 3:13–15 with reference to Num. 4:4–6 as a reference to the understanding of the Torah, when it is not understood from the perspective of Christ. The removal of the veil through the revelation of Christ

opens up a new understanding of God's self-communication through the Spirit. This disclosure of God's glory – the theme of *kābōd/dóxa* is again taken up – established freedom in the presence of God. Knowledge of God's glory is enabled by God, who created the light at the beginning of creation and who makes his light to shine into believer's hearts, so that they recognize the glory of God in the face of Christ.

> For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2Cor. 4:6)

Revelation thus allows believers to see the continuity from the initial act of creation to the disclosure of glory in the face of the resurrected crucified one. This is for Paul a form of embodied knowledge that displays both, being "given over to death" and being sustained by the hope that "the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus" (2Cor. 4:14). Paul says of himself as a paradigm of the believer's existence that "we always carry in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." (2Cor. 4:10) It is the certain hope of being raised with Jesus by God that constitutes freedom, a freedom that cannot be destroyed by death. The knowledge God gives to those who participate through baptism and in faith in the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection assures believers that there is no condemnation from God (Rom. 8:1–2) and so grants the freedom of the Spirit. In a striking passage which documents the interweaving of the understanding of the self-disclosure of God through Christ in the Spirit with the emerging proto-Trinitarian grammar of discourse about God Paul asserts:

> ...if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Rom. 8:11)

The participation of believers in the eternal life of God is the content of the final revelation of the glory of God. The eschatological vision of Paul's understanding of revelation correlates the anthropological and the cosmological dimension of the liberation of the cosmos from the bondage to frustration and decay.

> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Rom. 8:18–20)

For the Gospel of John the incarnation of the eternal Word of God (John 1:14) who is one with God in Jesus and his exaltation on the cross is the only self-disclosure of the invisible God (John 14:6 – 9), God's exegesis (*exegésis*, John 1:18) in the world of experience through the medium of created means of communication. The revelation of God is promised to those who love Jesus and receive his Spirit. This revelation has for John the form of mutual indwelling and love:

> I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love Him and show myself to him. (John 14:20 – 21)

The witness of the Son (John 3:31– 34) and the testimony of the Father disclose one and the same truth. It is this truth into which the Spirit leads believers: "...when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." (John 16:13)

3 The Formation of the Understanding of Revelation in the History of Christian Doctrine

3.1 The Debates of the Early Church: Securing the Relationship between Author, Content and Actuality of Revelation

The understanding of revelation which is rooted in the Biblical witnesses to God's revelation had to be explicated and developed in distinction from pagan religions, in critical conversation with Judaism as the sister religion of Christianity and in critical engagement with the philosophical interpretations of reality. This provided the basis for the self-explication of Christian teaching over against misconstruals of the Christian message within the Christian communities themselves or on the margins of these communities. These different groups can be distinguished but cannot be tidily divided. Important strands of Judaism at the time were already engaged with philosophical schools and tried to demonstrate the superiority of the Jewish way of following the commandments of God over against philosophical orientations of the time.

The work of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – 50 CE) is a striking example of this, especially in the development of a theological hermeneutic that proved to

be a major inspiration for Christian theology.[9] The philosophical schools could exist in connection with pagan religiosities in spite of the powerful philosophical criticism of religious practice and belief by the classical philosophers. However, they should not be interpreted as theoretical constructions of reality, but rather as initiation into a way of life, trying to reach the fulfilment of human life through philosophical engagement.[10] This made the philosophical schools natural rivals for Christian theology and very important partners in critical engagement. The main task of critical reflections on what was seen as a deviation from the truth within the Christian communities called for a way to elaborate the connections between the author, the content and the mode of occurrence of revelation. Since a second-order concept of revelation developed only in the Middle Ages, these discussions had to engage the main substantive teachings of the Christian church. In this way the discussions in the Early Church provided the background for reflection of a terminologically clarified concept of revelation. Clarifying the Christian understanding of God in a Trinitarian view of God, as it was elaborated in the Eastern Church, proved to be the most important foundation for later, and more technical discussions on revelation. Perhaps the most crucial factor is the critical engagement with what was regarded as misinterpretations of the Christian message by groups within or on the margins of the Christian communities who had the capacity for dividing the community, the so-called heretics. The engagement with the heretics, all of whom of course attempted to present the true exposition of Christian doctrine, showed most clearly that these questions were not confined to the definition of doctrinal truth.[11] All the issues that were discussed in the debates of the Early Church concerned just

9 Cf. Runia, David T., *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, Assen: van Gorcum, 1993.

10 Cf. Hadot, Pierre, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995 and the comprehensive reinterpretation of ancient philosophy in id., *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

11 Cf. for a rich documentation of the history of theological reflection cf. Helmut Hoping/Gerhard Kardinal Müller (eds), *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, facicle 1a: Michael Seybold, *Offenbarung: Von der Schrift bis zum Ausgang der Scholastik*, Freiburg: Herder, 2014 and facicle 1b: Leo Schffczyk/Hans Waldenfels, *Offenbarung: Von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart*, Freiburg: Herder 2011. – The most comprehensive and concise overview of the reflection on revelation in the history of Western theology and philosophy is Herms, Eilert, "Offenbarung V. Theologiegeschichte und Dogmatik," in: Gerhard Müller (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. XXV, 146–210, Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1995. – For a concentrated account of the most important steps in the history of doctrine of the Early Church, cf. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, London: SPCK, [2]2005. Mark Edwards has provided a spirited defense and ample material for the contribution of the so-called heretics to the formation of catholic doctrine: Edwards, Mark, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church,* Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009.

as much the identity and integrity of the Christian Church, its forms of community organization, its ethos and, perhaps most importantly, its worship.

What were the main issues that had to be resolved in these debates in order to develop an understanding of divine self-communication that was appropriate to the witness of the biblical writings of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament? A view of revelation that reflected the way in which divine self-communication was presupposed in the practices of Christian worship and that provided the basis of an understanding of God as creator, redeemer and consummator of the world. Such an understanding of revelation had to offer a view of the world as God's creation and the created stage for the drama of salvation. Finally such a view had to initiate Christians into a Christian way of life that was in accordance with was perceived as the disclosure of divine truth.

One of the most decisive steps was taken by Justin Martyr, who, born a pagan, became the most influential Christian apologist of the 2nd century. Born in 100 he was martyred some time between 64 and 68 CE. Intent to present the Christian faith as the true philosophy (*vera philosophia*) he identified Jesus Christ with the Logos of God, who is generated by God's will before all creatures and is the rational mediator of creation who then is the mediator of God's knowledge and will in the incarnation. His *Dialogue with Trypho* illustrates the complex triangle addressed by early Christian apologetics. Justin who travelled about, donning the dress of a philosopher, recounts his early philosophical training and engages in a dialogue with the Jew Trypho, trying to persuade him to join the Christian faith he himself had just converted to. The striking identification of Jesus Christ with the Logos of God serves as the foundation on which Christ's teaching, life and death can be understood as the communication of the truth of God in human, created form. However, this move also bequeathed to later theology the distinction between the *Logos asarkos*, the Logos without the flesh, before, and after the incarnation, and the *Logos ensarkos,* the Logos in the flesh.[12] The result of this argument for the understanding is immediately obvious: The truth disclosed in Jesus in time is the eternal truth of God by means of which the Logos is the mediator of creation and the instrument for its salvation and consummation.

Once Christ is seen as the Logos incarnate, the problem arises, in which sense and how, if at all the Logos of God can become incarnate. On a view like that of Philo of Alexandria who operates with a sharp distinction between

12 Cf. Jenson, Robert W., "Once More on the *Logos asarkos* (2011)," in: Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics. Essays on God and Creation*, ed. by Stephen John Wright, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014.

the rational world and the world of sense experience the Logos has to remain discarnate. Could one then say that the Logos only appeared to be an embodied being? This so-called docetic view applies a dualist view of reality into the interpretation of Christian faith. It was a common denominator of many so-called gnostic teachings. Such a view undermines the integrity of Christian faith: It challenges the reality of the incarnation, but also the unity of reality if Jesus is seen as a spark of light, appearing on earth in order to lead those he instructs with the truth out of the bondage to the world of matter. The danger of a view of the Christ event which is focused on liberation from the world of matter is to drive a wedge between the creator who appears as an incompetent demiurge and the redeemer who liberates from the world the creator has so inexpertly cobbled together. Furthermore, once the Gospel is only about liberation from the world and no longer about the reconciliation of the world, the Hebrew Bible is no longer regarded as the record of authentic divine self-communication and must be discarded as authoritative Scripture, as Marcion proposed.

The whole bundle of teachings we regard as gnostic (although that might be a problematical simplification) was effectively criticized by Irenaeus of Lyon (c130–c202 CE).[13] He can be seen as one of the two first systematic theologians of Christianity, Origen being the other. Irenaeus construes the whole of the divine economy as one narrative in which everything is effected by God through his "two hands", the Son and the Spirit. The unity of reality is safeguarded by the one differentiated narrative of God's agency in creation, preservation, salvation and consummation. Working with a systematic typology of Adam and Christ, Irenaeus depicts Christ as the reversal of Adam's contradiction against God, as the *recapitulation* of the whole of history of humankind. The revelation of Christ discloses the whole of reality as one narrative ordered through the Trinitarian action of God. The authenticity of revelation is safeguarded through the witness of Scripture which reliably recounts the revelatory events, as if they were spoken by the Word of God and the Spirit (*haer* II,28,2: "*Quippe a Verbo Dei et Spiritu eius dictae*"). They preserve the truth of the revelation in Christ forever young and are the foundation for the "canon of truth" (*haer* III,24,1). They therefore support the work of the bishops as the successors of the Apostles in the authentic transmission of the testimony of God's revelation in Christ. Irenaeus is the first theologian who reflects in the question of how divine self-communication

13 Cf. the short study of Nielsen, Jan T., *Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons. An Examination of the Function of the Adam-Christ Typology in the Adversus Haereses of Ireaneus, against the Background of the Gnosticism of His Time*, Assen: van Gorkum, 1968. The ecclesial ramifications of Irenaeus' theology are well brought out by Farrow, Douglas, "St. Irenaeus of Lyons. The Church and the World," *Pro Ecclesia* 4,3 (1995), 333–355.

can be handed on in processes of transmission through human witnesses and nevertheless maintains its divine origin, content and mode of effectiveness.

While Irenaeus presents a quasi-linear integration of the whole of reality as comprised within one narrative of the divine economy, Origen (ca. 184 – ca. 253) developed a Christian view of the unity of reality as a vertical hierarchical system of ontological orders in *On first Principles*.[14] Origen's Christian metaphysics and his extensive work on the *Hexapla* as well as his exegetical writings must be seen as two sides of one project. He tried to show that God's revelation in Christ opens up a comprehensive understanding of reality, focusing on the conditions for the possibility of the divine self-manifestation in history as the ground for the process of *pronoia* (providence) and *paideusis* (pedagogy) by means of which the Logos reunites created reality with its origin in God. This understanding of reality is authentically testified in Scripture which therefore contains all truth. Scripture appears, if we may borrow this formula from J.A. Möhler, as "the extension of the Incarnation".[15] Origen is careful not to ascribe a quasi independent divine status to Scripture. Scripture is like every moment of the divine process of providence and the education of humankind rooted in the eternal being of God, communicated by the Logos through the Spirit. The *theopneustia* (inspiration) of Scripture relates it back to God's eternal being and will and does not establish an independent inerrancy.

The debates which were fought with passion and polemics in the Early Church concerned the way in which the author, the content and the process of divine self-communication can be thought of as one, although they are obviously differentiated. In order to clarify this question which eventually leads to the Trinitarian dogma, the status of the incarnate Son must first be elucidated. If Jesus Christ is a creature then he cannot in his person be the reality of divine self-communication but only a created pointer to the divine truth. If, however, he is of one being with God the Father, then the creaturely mode of divine self-communication does not falsify the claims made for its author and content. The problem, as it presented itself at the beginning of the 4th century was that the onto-

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14 Cf. Trigg, Joseph Wilson, *Origen*, New York: Routledge, 1998. A new translation: Origen, *On First Principles*, ed. by John Behr, Oxford Early Christian Texts, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

15 Möhler writes: "So ist denn die sichtbare Kirche … der unter den Menschen in menschlicher Form fortwährend erscheinende, stets sich erneuernde, ewig sich verjüngende Sohn Gottes, die andauernde Fleischwerdung desselben, so wie den auch die Gläubigen in der heiligen Schrift der Leib Christi genannt werden." (Möhler, Johann Adam, *Symbolik, oder Darstellung der dogmatischen Gegensätze der Katholiken und der Protestanten nach ihren öffentlichen Bekenntnisschriften*, § 36, Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 61895, 332 f.)

logical status of the Logos had not been defined clearly. When the divine status of the Logos had to be emphasized in stating that he really is the agent of God's self-communication, he could be brought close to God. When his involvement in history was emphasized he seemed to belong more to the creaturely realm. The controversy could be traced back to the writings of Origen. Although he clearly taught that the Logos is eternally generated (*aéi gennãtai*), he also taught that the Logos was subordinate to the Father, and the Spirit subordinate to the Logos. Arius basically triggered a debate on the question on which side of the dividing line between the uncreated eternal being of God and the created being of creation the Logos should be placed.[16] Arius suggested that the radical transcendence of God the Father could not be compromised and therefore taught that the Logos is the highest creature, created before the creation of the world, but nevertheless created.

The decision of the council of Nicaea of 325 CE that the Son is *homousios*, of one essence with the Father, was at the time quite contentious. Could the being of the Incarnate Lord be described with a phrase that did not have scriptural authority? And how should one accommodate two identities, the Father and the Son, in the one divine essence? Only around the middle of the 4th century the pro-Nicene party had consolidated and developed a view of the coessentiality of the Son with the Father. This, however, left the question how the status of the Spirit should be decided. Is the evidence of subordination to the Father not even stronger in the case of the Spirit? The so-called Spirit-fighters (*pneumatomáchoi*) who were also called Macedonians after the bishop Macedonius who had been installed in Constantinople through Constantius denied the full deity of the Spirit. Here it was the fourth Cappadocian Amphilochius of Iconium who persistently urged a rejection of this view and persuaded Basil of Caesarea to write his famous treatise *On the Holy Spirit*.

What was at stake for the understanding of revelation? The *homousios* (consubstantiality) of Christ was intended to secure that Christ is not just a pointer to God, a moral example that we should follow, but that in him believers encounter the true reality of God. The question of the consubstantiality of the Spirit raised the question whether the appropriation of the revelation of Christ was really part of the revelation of Christ or whether the revelation had to be made effective by some kind of human cooperation. Could the same Spirit be seen as the giver of faith to the individual believer and as the one who consummates the work of God in Christ, the true "first fruits" (Rom. 8:23) of the future perfection of God's

16 Cf. Williams, Rowan, *Arius. Heresy and Tradition*, revised edition, London: SCM Press, 2009.

plan to be in communion with his reconciled and perfected creation, the Spirit who sets creation free?[17]

The famous Cappadocian solution to distinguish between *ousia* and *hypostasis* and to use one term (*ousia*) for the essence of God, the other for the personal identity of Father, Son and Spirit who coequally share in the divine essence is the correlate of Basil's view of God's Trinitarian action wherein each divine act the Father is the uncaused cause, the Son the causing cause and the Spirit the perfecting cause. For the understanding of revelation this implied that all revelation is rooted in the Father, occurs through the Son, the incarnation of the Creator Logos and is completed in the work of the Spirit who is coequally God with Father and Son. The implication of this view is that the whole of the divine economy is to be seen as a Trinitarian history of salvation. The important ecclesiological point that follows from this is that the activity of the Church is enveloped in the activity of the Trinitarian God. It does not have any independent agency, but is the creature and instrument of God's creative and perfecting agency. Positively, this means that the divine economy of revelation extends to the activity of the Church, enabling it to be an instrument for the actualization of God's revelation, both in the inspiration of the believer and through the sacramental life of the church.

The resolution of the debates on the ontological status of the Logos/Son and the Holy Spirit in relation to the being of the Father at the Council of Constantinople (381 CE) that was later cast in the formula *mía ousía – treĩs hypostâseis* indirectly had a decisive effect on the understanding of revelation: It must be understood as the self-presentation of the Father through the Son in the Spirit. However, how this solution, worked out in the debates in the East, was then received in the West is still a matter of debate. Did Augustine's work *De Trinitate*, the defining work of Western Trinitarian theology until today, reflect the solution reached in the East or is Augustine's legacy entirely problematical? Is Augustine's view on the reality of sin and actuality of grace the working out of the solution reached in the debates preceding the Council of Constantinople? It is perhaps more important that the "Cappadocian" Trinitarian theology is still present in the worship of Christian churches East and West when they use the Nicene (Constantinopolitan) Creed.

17 Cf. on this cosmological dimension Bergmann, Sigurd, *Creation Set Free. The Spirit as Liberator of Nature*, Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 2005.

3.2 Reason and Revelation: Contours of the Medieval Debate

In the Middle Ages the indirect and largely implicit discussion of the concept of revelation through the reflection on the contents of Christian faith and the mode how they are given in the Early Church makes way for the direct and explicit reflection on revelation and its relationship to reason. Many factors contribute to the necessity to make the Christian revelation an explicit topic of theological reflection and to elaborate an explicit concept of revelation. There are, first of all, the tensions between different theological and philosophical traditions and the ways of approaching the topic from their respective perspectives. Secondly, there are also different modes of theological reflection, depending on whether theology is mainly pursued in a monastic or a scholastic context. Thirdly, there is the influence of other religious and theological traditions, engaging in many ways with similar challenges. These factors can be distinguished, but not separated. They form a bundle of influences with frequent interferences.

The Middle Ages are the time of the most intense interaction between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, occasioned through political and cultural encounters which were primarily due to the spread and clash of spheres of influence between Christianity and Islam. In connection with these political and economic relationships there is a far-reaching cross-fertilization of influences which pertain to all cultural spheres and intellectual pursuits, including theology and philosophy. Judaism had to survive and nurture its own culture as a minority in Muslim or Christian territories, and is therefore often characterized by the engagement with both traditions in order to maintain its distinctive identity. The world-wide encounter of religious and theological traditions in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century has created a new sensibility and awareness for their interaction in previous centuries. What was formerly a specialist interest on the margins of theological teaching and research has become a major concern at the center of theological attention. The consequence of the recognition of a complex and interesting history of interaction has led to the acknowledgement that the history of Christian theology, of Islamic theology and Jewish thought in the Middle Ages cannot be written in separation from one another. It can only be fruitfully approached with the expectation that tracing the lines of interaction and the channels of mutual influence will provide us with a richer and more plausible picture of the history of each tradition and of the history of their exchanges. The history of Christian theology in the Middle Ages can no longer be written as a history that is independent of the parallel histories of Islamic and Jewish thought. The diachronic logic of development that was usually applied must now be supplemented by a synchronic logic of interaction, influencing the development in each of the three traditions. This new per-

spective is still in the process of being established. We can here merely give a few hints how the picture might change once we have a fuller view of those parts of the field that have so far been neglected. Engaging in this work, means for each of the three traditions discovering aspects of their own histories that cannot be understood apart from the relationship to the respective other. This discovery means that the identity of the other, approached as alterity from one's own standpoint, offers important insights into the making of one's own identity in the process of assimilating or rejecting, adapting or distancing the influences of the other. Making these processes transparent contains the promise that the discovery of these processes of exchange in the past provides us with resources for our present encounter in interfaith work and collaborative theological reflection.

The one problem that Judaism, Christianity and Islam had in common in the Middle Ages is the problem of the relationship of revelation and reason. This question is the framework in which all the other debates within each tradition and between the different traditions is discussed. The problem acquired this dominant character by the renewed relevance and attractiveness by the resurgence of philosophy in its new forms through the rediscovery of the sources from Aristotle reaching its full impact in the reception of Aristotelian writings by the Islamic philosophers and theologians of the Mu'tazilite school.[18] The importance of the influence of this school cannot be overemphasized. It defined the paradigm within which classical Dominican philosophy like that of Thomas Aquinas worked.

The second factor is the transmission of classic Neoplatonist philosophy through Christian theologians from the East to West so that classics of Neoplatonist Christian spirituality like the works of Pseudo-Dionysius became accessible in the metaphysical system of John Scotus Eriugena. One of the determining factors of how the revelation is understood in the medieval period depends on the philosophical view that is adopted and appropriated by Christian theologians. The critical engagement with 'the philosophers,' especially with regard to the interpretation of the meaning, scope and significance of revelation, is a central focus of classical forms of Jewish thought, like Yehuda ha-Levi's *Sefer ha-Kusari* (*The Kuzari*)[19] and Moses Maimonides' *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* (*The Guide*

18 For a concise and magisterial overview cf. Ess, Josef van, *The Flowering of Islamic Theology,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

19 Halevi, Yehuda, *The Kuzari*, with an introduction by Henry Slonimsky, New York: Schocken Books, 1966.

of the Perplexed),[20] of Christian theology, like Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *Summa theologiae*, and of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers).[21]

John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815 – c. 877 CE), the Irish monk, Neoplatonist philosopher, translator and commentator of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, in many ways the bridge between ancient philosophy set the ball rolling with the bold thesis: "Authority is the source of knowledge, but our own reason remains the authority by which all authority must be judged."[22] This thesis introduced a sharp separation between faith and knowledge and gave to reason the role of being the final arbiter by sitting in judgment over all knowledge claims. This rationalist view presupposed a view of reality where revelation is understood as the transparency of creation in its graded divisions for its transcendent ground. The double movement, constitutive for Dionysius, of God transcending God's being in the *ekstasis* of descent in revelation to created being, and created being, in turn, transcending its finite boundaries in mystical ascent is reduced to one movement of theoretical ascent. This rationalist trajectory is continued by Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142), now within the framework of an Aristotelian logic, who emphasized the sufficiency of reason in all matters of religious knowing based on the investigation of the created world, because faith can only anticipate in a form estimation the more complete disclosure of truth in the hereafter.[23] The emphasis on the power of reason over against historical revelation rests on a view that knowledge of creation is sufficient for knowledge of God. Once creation is understood as natural, the priority of natural reason is affirmed.

By no means inferior to the logical sophistication of Abelard's dialectics, Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109) devised a scheme in which the eternal word of God, understood as utterance (*locutio*) existed before everything is created by means of it and it can be known on the basis of the likeness of the created mind to the divine spirit as it makes itself known in time. The possibility of knowing God is rooted in the being of the supreme essence as self-communica-

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20 Maimonides, Moses, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Shlomo Pines, with an Introductory Essay by Leo Strauss, 2 vols., Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

21 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, A Parallel English-Arabic Text, trans., introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura, Provo UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997/2000.

22 Quoted in Freemantle, Ann, *The Age of Belief. The Medieval* Philosophers, selected with introduction and interpretive commentary, Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1955, 80.

23 An impressive survey of Abelard's achievements is Marenbom, John, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

tion which communicates itself in order to be known by finite beings. The Trinitarian constitution of God's being is in this way the condition for the possibility of God's self-manifestation not only in the order of creation but also in historical time through the witness of the church:

> … it would seem possible that such a verbalization (*locutio*) exists in the supreme substance, and that it existed before its objects, in order for things to be created through it, and which exists now, in order that through it created things may be known.[24]

Therefore, faith is not relegated from the sphere of knowing as in Eriugena, but rather becomes foundational for understanding: *fides quaerens intellectum*. The *Proslogion* therefore starts with the petition: "Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You, where and how to find you."[25] Finding God is the fulfilment of the human creature's purpose ("I was made in order to see You."). Nevertheless, even the seeking of God must be granted by divine revelation: "I can neither seek You if You do not teach me how, nor find You unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring You; let me desire You in seeking You; let me find You in loving You."[26] The image of the Trinitarian God who is remembering (*memoria*), thinking (*intellectus*) and love (*amor*) in humans must be renewed in faith so that it is able to understand.

> I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I remember You, think of you, love You. But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it.[27]

Therefore faith, based on the renewal of the image of God through Christ and in participation in the worship of the church, explicitly expressed in the form of the *Proslogion* as address to God in prayer, is the condition on which understanding rests – not the other way around: "For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' [Isa. 7:9]."[28]

By means of his Trinitarian understanding of God reflected in the human mind, Anselm holds together God's revelation in creation, in Christ and through

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24 Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion* 10, Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. with an introduction by Brian Davies and G.R. Evans, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998/2008.
25 Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* 1, *op.cit*. 84 – 5.
26 *Op. cit.*, 86 – 87.
27 *Op. cit.*, 87.
28 Ibid.

the life of worship in the church. The fault-lines of the conflict become clear: Is the function of reason that of constituting knowledge of God or is its function the explication of faith which contains the knowledge of God that constitutes for humans in his revelation.

The orientation of revelation towards the experiential interiorization of the Word of God through the Spirit, active in Scripture and its liturgical use in the church, is the hallmark of medieval monastic theology. Its opposition with the rationalist interpretation of knowledge of God has become famous in the conflict between Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153 CE) and Abelard. For Bernard love is the striving for the communion with God which will only be fully realized in the beatific vision. The striving of the soul for communion with the Word (*anima quaerens verbum*) becomes the context for the understanding of revelation. This is not a mystical revelation apart from the disclosure of God in Christ and through the Word of Scripture transmitted through the worship of the Church, but rather the experiential focusing of the unity of God's Trinitarian self-disclosure.

The experiential focus of the understanding of revelation must not be interpreted reductively, but rather comprehensively as the focusing of God's self-disclosure which through the guidance of Scripture makes the whole of creation again readable as God's self-communication. This most clearly developed in the two major works of the great theologian of the Franciscan tradition: the *Breviloquium* and the *Itinerarium* of Bonaventure. While the *Breviloquium* offers a comprehensive account of Christian teaching, based on Scripture, the *Itinerarium* describes the journey of the soul to God. The *Breviloquium* demonstrates that all Christian teaching, from the doctrine of Trinity to the Last Judgment, indeed all knowledge "insofar as this knowledge serves the purpose of salvation" must be based on Scripture because, as the "Prologue" argues, it has its origin, development and end in the self-communication of the Triune God in words and deeds. Bonaventure offers this account of the Triune God as the source of revelation in Scripture, emphasizing the unity of God's communication in word and action:

> God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit speaking by the mouth of the prophets and of the others who committed its doctrine to writing. Now, God speaks not with words alone, but also with deeds, for with Him saying is doing and doing is saying; moreover, all creatures are the effects of God's action, and, as such, point to their Cause. Therefore, in Scripture, which is received from God, both words and deeds are meaningful. – Again, Christ the Teacher, lowly as He was in the flesh, remained lofty in His divinity. It was fitting, therefore, that He and His teachings should be humble in word and profound in meaning: even as the Infant Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes, so God's wisdom is wrapped in humble images. (Prol 4.5)

This account, which Bonaventure supplements with a description of the breadth, length, height and depth of Scripture, is supplemented with a description of the method of Scripture and a short treatise on the interpretation of Scripture. This presents Scripture as the book of the world which makes everything in the world readable as an expression of the divine meaning invested in it. This, necessarily, involves an understanding of philosophy, where philosophy in everything it achieves, remains an instrument for the explication of the truth of Scripture. It treats the natural knowledge of philosophy as a mirror for reflecting things divine. Philosophy in this way becomes a subservient means for divine revelation:

> Now, philosophy is concerned with things as they exist in their nature, or again, as they exist in the soul by innate or empirical knowledge; but theology, being a science both based on faith and revealed by the Holy Spirit, is concerned with grace and glory and Eternal Wisdom. It uses philosophical knowledge as its servant, borrowing from the natural order what it needs to make a mirror for the representation of things divine; erecting, as it were, a ladder, whose foot rests upon the earth but whose top reaches heaven. And all this is done through the one Hierarch, Jesus Christ, who is Hierarch not only in the hierarchy of the Church by reason of the human nature He assumed, but also in the angelical hierarchy, and again, as the Second Person sharing the supercelestial hierarchy of the most blessed Trinity. Through Him, the grace of unction runs down from the supreme Head, God, not only upon the beard, but even to the skirt of His garment: not only upon the heavenly Jerusalem, but even to the Church Militant. (Breviloqu. Prol 3.2)

The true Jacob's ladder, however, is not philosophy, but the ascent of the soul to God which is described in the *Itinerarium.*[29] The external aspect of revelation is here correlated to the internal aspect of the soul's journey to achieve fulfilment in communion with the triune God. By relating the soul's powers of remembering, knowing and loving on the third step of the ladder to Father, Son and Spirit, he finds the source of the soul's structure and capacity in the Trinity who is Father, Word and Love, "non essentialiter, non accidentaliter, ergo personaliter" (It III.5). The next step then relates these capacities, as they are rooted in the Trinity to the divisions of philosophy, so that natural philosophy corresponds to the Father, rational philosophy to the Word and moral philosophy to Love. Bonaventure can then extend Anselm's ontological argument, on the sixth step, to a demonstration that the highest being ("*optimum quod simpliciter est quo nihil melius cogitari potest*" (It IV.2) necessarily must be thought of as superabundance (*bonum diffusium*) which is diffused perfectly and completely in the manner of the processions of generation and spiration. Having climbed the six steps, the

29 Cf. the excellent interpretation of the *Itinerarium* in Harmless, William S.J., "Mystic as Cartographer," in: id., *Mystics*, 79–105, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

soul finally finds its rest in communion with the Triune God. This is by no means a treatise on the knowledge of the Trinity by the powers of natural reason alone. Rather, it presents the internal correlate of the knowledge of God in Scripture, as it is developed in the *Breviloquium*. True knowledge of God is grounded in the correlation of the external aspect of God's self-communication in Scripture, summarizing the whole of his words and deeds, and of the internal aspects, the ascent of the soul to its origin in the Triune God. Philosophy seems to be consistently enveloped within the theological knowledge of revelation in both its external and internal aspects.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE), the Dominican counter-part to the role Bonaventure played for the Franciscans, argues in the *Summa theologiae* that a sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*) is necessary if humans want to achieve the aim of their existence. Humans are as God's creatures oriented towards their end in God. This ultimate end transcends the discursive understanding of natural reason. Therefore, it is necessary for salvation that humans know their destiny through divine revelation.

> Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that beside philosophical science built up by reason there should be a sacred science learned through revelation. (STh I qu.1 a 1 resp.) [1]

Now, there are two kinds of sciences. Some proceed from principles known by natural reason because they are self-evident. Some proceed from principles established by the light of a higher science, as music works on the basis of the principles of arithmetic. Thomas continues:

> So it is that sacred doctrine proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed. Hence, just as the musician accepts on authority the principles taught him by the mathematician, so science is established on principles revealed by God. (Sth I qu.1 a 2[2])

This view entails a strict self-limitation of natural reason which is rooted in the fact human existence has a supernatural end. Knowledge of this end, communion with God, can only be revealed by God. What can be known of the end of human existence must therefore be revealed. Theology in its practice as a science is therefore a *scientia subalternata*, a subordinate form of science, wholly dependent on the science of God and the blessed, the self-knowledge of God in which the blessed share in the beatific vision. This knowledge, God's knowledge which is disclosed in revelation, must be taught by authority. If every science is defined by the nature of its object, how can theology be the science of

God, if the essence of God is inaccessible to natural human reason? What if John of Damascus is right, that the essence of God cannot be defined?[30] Thomas replies that just as in some philosophical sciences we demonstrate something about the cause from its effects, we must also proceed in theology. "Although we cannot know in what consists the essence of God, nevertheless we make use of His effects, either in nature or in grace, in place of a definition, in regard to whatever is treated of in this science."[31] If we look at the effects of God "in place of a definition" we are directed to revelation as the basis of all knowledge of God as long as we have not yet achieved the beatific vision. What follows from this for the use of reason? Thomas states: "Although arguments from human reason cannot avail to prove what must be received on faith, nevertheless this doctrine argues from articles of faith to other truths."[32] This anti-rationalist point of Thomas' argument could not be expressed more clearly: Human reason cannot prove by way of logical demonstration the truth of Christian faith, because it can only function properly if it accepts its self-limitation. Natural reason cannot offer grounds for accepting the truth of faith. Conversely, we can argue from the truths of faith to other truths. Natural reason must find a place in a framework of faith based on revelation, disclosed through the effects of God. The role of reason is not the rational justification of faith, but the explication of the truths of faith disclosed in revelation and their application to other fields of knowledge.

Thomas' own exposition of this programmatic statement, however, raises quite a number of questions. How does the authority of doctrine in the teaching of the Church create certainty with regard to the author, content and the effect of revelation? How can revelation in its authority be transmitted in the teaching of the Church? Such questions are dealt with in Thomas' account of three stages of public revelation: before the law (Abraham), under the Law (Moses) and under grace (Christ).[33] In explicating this three-stage process Thomas can develop a full Aristotelian psychology of revelatory experience. The great variety of means of God's self-disclosure through historical events, visions, dreams and intellectual intuitions must be assessed and adjudicated by the mind as it is empowered by the divine truth.[34] There remains an ambiguity here since it is not entirely clear to what extent the certainty as the effect of revelation is dependent on the judgement of reason on the credibility of the witnesses to revelation and on the rational demonstration of the necessity of relying on supernatural revela-

30 STh I qu.1 a 7 obj. quoting John of Damascus *De fide orthodoxa* I, 4.
31 STh I Qu 1 a 7 sed contr. [5].
32 STh I qu 1 a 8 resp. [8].
33 Cf. STh II-II q. 174, a.6.
34 Cf. STh II-II, q. 173.

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If one applies the critical motto of the Enlightenment "sapere aude" ("dare to be wise") to the Enlightenment and its dogmatic view to the relationship of revelation and reason, one will see, Herms hopes, that both its view of rationality and of revelation cannot be confirmed in careful attention to the ways in which all our knowledge presupposes that we live in disclosure situation. This, in turn, challenges us to restrict the understanding of revelation not to the communication of supernatural truths but to see it as a condition given with every form of human being in the world.

One could raise the question whether this detailed reconstruction of the understanding of revelation is itself a general theory of revelation, designed as the philosophical framework for a Christian theological account of revelation. This objection does not do justice for the full account of revelation which Herms develops in his *Systematic Theology*. He claims that the account he offers is indeed based on the revelation of Christ and has its ultimate basis in the experience which is summarized in the Gospel of Luke in the sentence: "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24:34) If one takes the revelation in Christ seriously, then it opens up a view of the whole of creation as the self-disclosure of the God the creator. Therefore, Herms introduces his discussion of revelation with the thesis that Christian faith is the *exemplar*, the paradigmatic case of how faith has its foundation and object in disclosure situations.

4 Phenomena, Signs and Concepts: A Heuristic Model for Investigating the Structure of Revelation

The complex history of the discussion of revelation in Christianity offers ample illustrations of the systematic questions that have fueled the debates on revelation from the beginning in the early church. The answers given to the set of questions that we raised at the beginning of this chapter have been summarized by presenting them as different models of revelation, picking out the constitutive features of each account of revelation. Avery Dulles has analyzed the use of the concept of revelation in terms of five models, that arrange the answers given to the leading questions in patterns that serve as an interpretation of

the wealth of accounts of revelation in the biblical writings and in the debates in the Christian communities.[69] In his reconstruction there are five models:

a) Revelation as doctrine, where revelation is found "in clear propositional statements attributed to God as authoritative teacher".[70] While certain strands in Protestantism would associate this view primarily with the *Bible* as the source of all knowledge of God and the world, in Roman Catholic theology it is primarily associated with the *magisterium*, the teaching office of the Church regarded as "God's infallible oracle."[71]
b) Revelation as history, according to which God's revelation occurs primarily in God's "mighty acts" which are the content and the ultimate sphere of justification for all statements about God, God's being and God's will.
c) Revelation as inner experience in which revelation is neither a set of propositions nor a series of events, but the interior transformation of humans when they are drawn into communion with God.
d) Revelation as "dialectical presence" is the name Dulles gives to the view of the "dialectical theologians" who emphasize both the sovereignty and gratuity of God's self-revelation and the impossibility of gaining knowledge of God by the independent capacities of human reason, so that revelation remains God's prerogative to such an extent that even in revelation there remains an element of concealment.
e) Revelation as inner awareness where revelation is understood as an expansion of consciousness or a shift of perspective due to which reality appears in a new light.

While the attempt at summarizing the distinctive features of theological theories of revelation is certainly useful, it also underlines that the features singled out as distinctive for the different models can be found in every experience of revelation. Revelation, even where it is not understood as the handing down of true propositions but as a personal encounter, must result in a disclosure of truth, opening up a new way in which we understand "what is the case". This seems to be already implied in the concept of revelation. Even where revelation is not understood as the communication of propositions, its result must be able to be expressed in propositions. Furthermore, even where the understanding of revelation is not restricted to God's acts in history, it is nevertheless clear that revelation is always embedded in the texture of contingent events in the

69 Dulles, Avery S.J., *Models of Revelation*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1983; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 17th imprint, 2011.
70 Ibid., 27.
71 Ibid.

spatio-temporal order of experience. Therefore, revelation is always located in a narrative: the narrative of the life of the recipient of revelation, the narrative of how the content of revelation rearranges the narrative structure of the life of believers and their communities, and the narrative of God's interaction and conversation with creation. At the same time, it is always clear that the impact of revelation always transcends the moment in which it occurs and illumines other aspects of the experience of reality, changing both the order of remembering and the expectation of the future. A similar observation can be made with regard to the model of revelation as an inner experience. It belongs to the very character of a revelation that it cannot merely remain in the external sphere of human experience, it must engage the interior dimension of human life. However, revelation also questions whether the distinction between the "inner" and the "outer" dimension of existence is a valid one. Revelation always includes that the "inner" structure of experience is confronted with encountering a reality that it did not constitute itself, and that what has been interiorized has the power of transforming all dimensions of human life from within. The model of "dialectical presence", in which Dulles summarizes the view of the "dialectical theologians" points to the critique that the understanding of revelation is implied with regard to any account of human reason or insight as actively constituted in human acts of knowing. This critical point, however, may not be overemphasized. Even if revelation is received in utter passivity, it nevertheless changes all the dimensions of active human action with the world and with God. Furthermore, while it is right to insist that God is and always remains "the Lord" in his revelation, that there does not occur a "change of subject" in revelation so that humans take over the communication of the content of revelation with God as the "object", it must nevertheless be emphasized that revelation changes the *relationship* between the author and the recipient of revelation. The emphasis on the sovereignty and hiddenness of God in his revelation may not call the effect of the revelation into question. Moreover, there is a theological tradition, of which Martin Luther is an important representative, that emphasizes that God conceals in order to reveal. The "naked majesty" of God remains inaccessible. However, when God reveals the "depths of his fatherly heart", he conceals it, often under the opposite, i.e. in the cross of Christ or in creaturely means of communication.[72] With regard to the model of "inner awareness" it seems similarly necessary to see this as an aspect of revelation, but to emphasize at the same time that revelation is never a simple "expansion" of consciousness but includes its transformation. In short, while the different models may be a helpful device

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72 Paulson, Stephen D., "Luther on the Hidden God," *Word and World* (1999), 363–371.

for distinguishing different theories of revelation, they are in danger of offering a restricted understanding of revelation, if the theoretical emphases are projected back onto the phenomena of revelation.

Is there another way of characterizing revelation that does do justice to its structure and allows for the variety of revelatory phenomena and experiences? Such a way would have to account for the structural features that underlie the history of debates on revelation. We can try to clarify the structure of revelation with the help of following formula for a disclosure event:

> The author (A) discloses in the situation (B) the content (C) for the recipient (D) with the effect (E).[73]

Revelation can only be described where a revelation has occurred. The formula is therefore a retrospective description of the disclosure experience and presupposes its effect. A stands for the author of revelation, B for the situation in which the revelation occurs. Speaking of a "medium" of revelation is an incomplete description. The situation in which the disclosure occurs includes the personal bodily involvement of the recipient of a revelation in the disclosure situation at a particular place and a particular point in time. This disclosure event occurs contingently at a particular point in the life of the recipient of revelation. It connects with the preceding history and shapes the following events in the life of the recipient. However, the author of the disclosure experiences must also be seen as involved in this situation. Disclosure experience involves a sense of the author becoming present in this situation, of relating in active communication with the recipient and using the circumstances and the capacities of the recipient for the disclosure. The content C that is disclosed in this situation can cover a variety of modes of communication and a variety of contents. Crucial is that it establishes a relationship between the author and the recipient of revelation that obligates the recipient. It is an address that demands a response. It is a directed form of communication that expresses the intention of the author of revelation and the way in which the disclosed content of revelation serves the realization of the intention of the author of revelation. Even where revelation is not

73 The formula was first introduced in my book *God. Action and Revelation*, Kampen: Kok Pharos: Kampen NL, 1992. One of the main inspirations was Eilert Herms' study "Offenbarung" (1985), now in: *Offenbarung und Glaube,* 168 – 220. For a further development cf. Schwöbel, Christoph. "Revelation," in: Hans Dieter Betz [et al.] (eds), *Religion. Past and Present*, vol. 11, 162 – 163; 169 – 170; 172 – 173, Leiden: Brill, 2011. Cf. Charry, Ellen T., "Revelation," in: Chad Meister/Paul Copan (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 609 – 615, London: Routledge, [2]2013.

explicitly characterized as self-revelation, it always contains these elements of a communicative encounter that creates communion. The content that is being disclosed therefore always includes the person and the life of the recipient in such a way that the life of the recipient is also disclosed through the content of revelation. The content is in this way self-involving for both the author and the recipient of revelation. This also applies to the recipient of the disclosure experience. The experience brings the recipient through the content into a communicative relationship with the author of revelation. The effects of the disclosure experience depend on the content of the disclosure experience. If it is a commission or a command, as in the case of Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3), the intended effect is the willingness to obey the command. If it is a question, as in Paul's account of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:6–12), an answer is required which may consist in a completely new direction of the life of the recipient. Again, it is important that the effect always implies a relationship to the author of revelation. It is never enough to simply to receive information. The power of the disclosure event is that it does indeed forge a relationship that now becomes determinative for the orientation of the recipient of revelation. This orientation now includes a relationship to the author of revelation. If, for instance, the effect of revelation is described as faith, this includes both the element of *trust in* and *believing that*. The recognition of the truth of what has been disclosed combines both elements, the truth of the message and the trustworthiness of the one who communicates it.

The formal structure that I have suggested offers many possibilities of inserting concrete content for the place-holders of the formula. As such it can be used to distinguish everyday disclosure experiences from religious disclosure experiences which concern the origin, meaning and destiny of human existence and of creation as a whole. It serves to illustrate that in all situations of life, our orientation in everyday matters and in matters of ultimate significance depends on disclosure experiences.

The formula provides a heuristic tool for describing experiences, for instance analyzing and interpreting the disclosure experiences that we encounter in the Bible. However, this should not disguise the fact that for most Christians, as well as for Jews and Muslims, such disclosure experiences occur through the mediation of the engagement with Scripture. It is in engaging with Scripture in the context of worship, study and meditation or in the context of proclamation, religious instruction or engagement with the Christian message that believers claim to receive orientation for their lives. Can these experiences of gaining insight and finding orientation for one's life also be described as disclosure experiences? Can the Scriptures that report disclosure experiences of the protagonists

of the biblical narratives be the communicative context in which disclosure experiences occur today?

Our basic formula allows for extending the description of the situation of a disclosure experience in such a way that it refers to situations in which the witness of God's revelation in the witnesses of Scripture and in the proclamation of the Gospel, in catechetical instruction and pastoral care part of the disclosure situation. The encounter with the biblical traditions then becomes a way in which God communicates the truth of the revelation Christ to believers today. We already find disclosure experiences mediated in a context in which the knowledge of Scripture plays in many places in the New Testament and in the places in the Hebrew Bible where inter-textual references are explicitly or implicitly made. The central claim of Christ's resurrection is both presented as a tradition and as "in accordance with the scriptures" in Paul's use of an early in confessional formula in 1Cor. 15:3–5:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

After the enumeration of more witnesses, Paul refers to his own disclosure experience: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1Cor. 15:8) The story of the disciples in Luke's gospel (Luke 24:13–35) who encounter a stranger on their way to Emmaus after Jesus' death and the unbelievable stories that he had risen illustrates in the description of a disclosure event the same interplay between the interpretation of Scripture, the celebration of a meal and opening of the eyes of the disciples which made them aware of the "burning of their hearts." This story probably also gives an account of how Luke thought Christian worship should be celebrated with the exposition of Scripture and a shared meal with thanksgiving.

It is the effect of disclosure experiences that these experiences, the circumstances in which they occurred, the effect which they occasioned and the insight which they open up become part of a living process of oral and then written tradition. In such a tradition the view of reality they disclose and the way of life they are handed on from generation to generation in a community in which these traditions become part of their life of worship, of their beliefs and ethical orientations and of their identity-definition. The fact that disclosure experiences are contingent events in space and time which cannot be repeated, implies that they have to be witnessed in order to become part of a tradition. The non-repeatability of the tradition-initiating disclosure experiences is an important element for their being preserved in written traditions. This process has quite a number of

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Asma Afsaruddin

The Concept of Revelation in Islam

Revelation is an extremely important concept within Islam. Within the Abrahamic religious tradition, the truth of Islam is perhaps uniquely anchored in a scripture directly revealed from God, as Muslims believe, preserved in its original Arabic language for subsequent generations of believers. In the Islamic context, revelation is a multidimensional and multivalent concept that binds humans to their Creator.

In this chapter, I will discuss ten primary aspects of revelation that are particularly significant in the Islamic context but also in a dialogic context involving the other two Abrahamic religions – Christianity and Judaism. These aspects are drawn from the Qurʾān and elaborated upon by referring to the rich Qurʾān commentary literature (*tafsīr*) and other extra-Qurʾānic discussions of revelation when relevant. The ten aspects are: a. revelation as communication between God and humans – language and divine truth; b. revelation as invitation to – and not imposition of –faith; c. revelation as oral and written text and the merits of its recitation; d. revelation as beautiful and inimitable text: the doctrine of *iʿjāz al- Qurʾān*; e. revelation as primordial text; f. revelation as manifestation of divine mercy and justice; g. revelation as a message of hope and guidance to humanity; h. revelation as reminder; i. revelation as mediation of the tension between inclusivism and exclusivism; and finally, j. revelation as affirmation of monotheism as common ground between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

These aspects are now discussed in detail below.

1 Revelation as Communication between God and Humans – Language and Divine Truth

The Arabic word for the phenomenon of revelation is *waḥy* and is, strictly speaking, applied to the Qurʾān alone. *Waḥy* more broadly means to send a message, often secretly, by means of a gesture, through written transmission, or by inspiration. In the Qurʾān, the term *waḥy* and its derivatives occur seventy-eight times. Except for five instances, all of these occurrences pertain to God as the one who sends down revelation.

The Qurʾānic revelation consists of words received directly from God and is set apart from the whimsical statements of human beings. Three verses (Qurʾān 53:3–5) make this very clear. They state:

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> He [sc. the Prophet Muḥammad] does not speak out of his own desire
> It [sc. the Qurʾān] is nothing but revelation (*in huwa illā waḥyun yūḥyā*)
> Which one endowed with strength taught him

Similarly, in Qurʾān 69:38 – 48, God speaks:

> So I do call to witness what you see, and what you see not. That is indeed the word of an honored messenger (sc. Muḥammad), it is not the word of a poet; Little it is that you believe!

The cluster of verses in Qurʾān 26:192 – 196 also asserts the divine provenance of Islam's central scripture and the role of the angel Gabriel, who is not otherwise explicitly named, in the transmission of revelation, here referred to as *tanzīl:*

> Indeed, it is a transmission (*tanzīl*) from the Lord of the Worlds
> Which the trustworthy spirit has brought down
> Upon your heart so that you may be one of the warners
> In plain Arabic speech
> And indeed it is in the scriptures of those who have preceded

The well-known twelfth/sixth century theologian Abū ʾl-Muʿīn an-Nasafī (d. 1114/508) describes the nature of the Qurʾānic revelation in the following manner:

> The Qurʾān is God's speaking, which is one of His attributes. Now God in all of His attributes is One, and with all His attributes is eternal and not contingent, (so His speaking is) without letters and without sounds, not broken up into syllables or paragraphs. It is not He nor is it other than He. He caused Gabriel to hear it as sound and letters, for He created sound and letters and caused him to hear it by that sound and those letters. Gabriel, upon whom be peace, memorized it, stored it (in his mind) and then transmitted to the Prophet, upon whom be God's blessing and peace, by bringing down a revelation and a message, which is not the same as bringing down a corporeal object and a form. He recited it to the Prophet, upon whom be God's blessing and peace, the Prophet memorized it, storing it up (in his mind), and then recited it to his Companions, who memorized it and recited to the Followers.[1]

The Qurʾān as direct divine revelation to humanity is furthermore protected from alteration and falsification. The Qurʾān thus describes itself as "an unassailable scripture" and that "Falsehood cannot come at it from before or behind, [for it is] a revelation (*tanzīl*) from the Wise, the Praiseworthy" (Qurʾān 41:42). God Himself

1 An-Nasafī, "Sea of Discourse," cited in: F. E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 173.

guarantees the Qurʾānʾs incorruptibility: “We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will certainly guard it (from corruption)” (Qurʾān 15:09).

The celebrated exegete Muḥammad b. Jarir aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923/310) comments that according to Qurʾān 54:3–5, God first imparted the Qurʾānic revelation to the angel Gabriel, described as “one endowed with strength,” who then communicated it to the Prophet.[2] In Qurʾān 26:193, he notes that Gabriel, according to a consensus of early exegetes, is identified as “the trustworthy spirit” who transmits the words of God to the Prophet.[3]

Another well-known commentator Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1210/606) comments that Qurʾān 54:3 provides a clear rebuttal to those who accused the Prophet of being a mere soothsayer or a poet; that is to say, someone who merely strings words together for magical effect.[4] Ar-Rāzī pays particular attention to the term *waḥy* and explains the term as follows:

> It is both a noun whose meaning is “the Book” and a verbal noun (gerund) which connotes “transmission” (*al-irsāl*) and “inspiration” (*al-ilhām*), as well as writing (*al-kitāba*), speech (*al-kalām*); allusion (*al-ishāra*); and instruction (*al-ifhām*), all of which constitute references to the Qurʾān.[5]

Ar-Rāzī also pays special attention to the term *tanzīl* occurring in Qurʾān 26:192. It means, he says, “that which is sent down” (*al-munazzal*) indicating the transmission of God’s words to the Prophet via Gabriel referred to as the “trustworthy spirit.” He further comments that the divine assertion “Indeed it is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds” points to the eloquent and inimitable nature of the Qurʾānic revelation, as well as to the fact that accounts of bygone generations of people are transmitted directly to Muḥammad by God and not via human learning and transmission.[6]

To explain the distinction between *waḥy* and *tanzīl*, it is worth quoting from a well-known modern scholar of Islam, Mahmoud Ayoub on the specific significations of these two terms. Ayoub states,

> *waḥy* is a general expression denoting in this context urgent divine communication to prophets, messengers, and other righteous persons, such as the prophet Zachariah and his son John the Baptist, Jesus and his mother Mary, and the mother of Moses. *Tanzīl*, in

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2 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Tafsīr aṭ-Ṭabarī*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1997, 11:504–505.

3 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 9:477. Gabriel is similarly described in Qurʾān 81:20.

4 Ar-Rāzī, Fakhr ad-Dīn, *At-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Beirut: Dār iḥyāʾ at-turāth al-ʿarabī, 1999, 10:235.

5 Ibid., 10: 235–237.

6 Ibid., 8:530.

> contrast, is God's sending down revelation over a specified period of time, as was the case with Moses, who received the Torah over a forty-day period on Mt. Sinai, or Muḥammad who received the Qurʾān through the angel Gabriel over a period of more than two decades. It must be observed that the revelation of the Qurʾān combines both *waḥy* – direct communication by Gabriel on God's behalf – and *tanzīl* – Gabriel coming down to him from God with revelations.[7]

More briefly, *waḥy* may therefore be understood as the actual phenomenon of divine communication and *tanzīl* as the content of that communication that is revealed over a period of time.

In a critical verse, the Qurʾān explains the various ways in which God chooses to communicate with humankind. The verse (42:51) states:

> It is not vouchsafed to any mortal that God should speak to him except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or through a messenger sent and authorized by Him to make known His will. Exalted is He, and Wise.

In his exegesis of this verse, aṭ-Ṭabarī comments that God does not speak to mortals except through revelation as he sees fit, or through inspiration (*ilhām*). If he should speak to a human being from behind a veil, it means the recipient can hear him but not see him, as was the case with Moses. Or he may send one of his emissaries, that is to say, one of his angels like Gabriel or others, in order to reveal his commandments and other aspects of his revelation.[8]

It is noteworthy that aṭ-Ṭabarī mentions the word "inspiration" (*ilhām*) in connection with revelation because in the Qurʾānic context there seems to be considerable overlap between the two concepts, especially when *waḥy* and its derivatives are applied to non-humans. Thus the Qurʾān says, "Then He completed and finished their creation (as) seven heavens, and He inspired (*awḥā*) in each heaven its affair" (41:12). This may be regarded as a reference to the natural laws which govern the orbits of the planets and the rotation of the earth, and so forth.

Similarly God "inspires" animals and imprints upon them their essential nature and instincts. Thus Qurʾān (16:68 – 69) relates, "And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, take as habitations mountains, and in the tree and in what (mankind) builds, then, eat of all fruits, and follow the ways of your Lord." This signifies the natural animal instinct that every creature is endowed with; bees, for example, instinctively build their hives and search for nectar from flowers.

7 See his "History of the Qurʾan and the Qurʾan in History," *The Muslim World* (2014), 430.
8 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 11:162.

God also inspires the angels to carry out His commands. The Qurʾān (8:12) says, “(Remember) When your Lord inspired (*idh yuḥy*) the angels, ‘I am with you, so keep firm those who have believed.’”

Waḥy is furthermore used more in the sense of inspiration than revelation in the case of some human recipients who are not prophets, such as Moses’ mother. Thus the Qurʾān (28:7) says, “And we inspired (*wa-āwḥaynā*) the mother of Moses, ‘Suckle him! But when you fear for him, then cast him into the river and fear not, nor grieve.’” Here God inspires the mother of Moses to undertake a certain course of action with out actual words spoken to her through the medium of an emissary as would have been the case with a revelation to a prophet.

In one case, it is a human being – albeit a prophet – who inspires his people to engage in praise of God. Qurʾān 19:11 refers to Zechariah who after having been forbidden from speaking for three days, “emerged before his people and inspired/signaled to them (*awḥā ilayhim*) to glorify God morning and night.” But since Zechariah was a prophet, ultimately we may understand his inspiring act to go back to God himself.

Depending on the agent, the term *waḥy* and its derivatives need not always have a positive connotation. The word is also used in connection with devils or malicious creatures who “inspire (*la-yuḥūna*) their cohort [among humans] to dispute with you” (Qurʾān 6:121). And again, “And thus We have appointed for every prophet an enemy – evil humans and jinns, who suggest (*yuḥy*) to one another alluring words of deception …” (Qurʾān 6:112).

The Arabic verb *alhama* which is the usual word that means “to inspire” is used only once in the Qurʾān (91:8) to refer to God who fashions the human soul and inspires it with discernment of good and evil. *Alhama* here would then be connected with the notion of *fiṭra* or the human inborn disposition, about which more will be said later.[9]

9 Outside of the Qurʾān there is a general distinction maintained between *waḥy* as divine revelation vouchsafed only to select prophets and *ilhām* or inspiration that may also be of divine provenance but is provided to select righteous people for private guidance. Such righteous people may include ordinary piety-minded folk and pious scholars, as well as righteous rulers and other caretakers with more mundane responsibilities.

2 Revelation as Invitation to – and Not Imposition of – Faith

According to the Qurʾān, there is only one infraction that God will not forgive in the hereafter: the sin of associationism or polytheism (*shirk*) (Qurʾān 4:48; 5:72). Monotheism is repeatedly affirmed through revelation and its salvific efficacy is underscored in a number of passages in the Qurʾān. Nowhere is this articulated more starkly and powerfully than in the fifth verse of the first or opening chapter (*al-Fātiḥa*) of the Qurʾān. This verse states: "It is [only] You we worship; it is [only] You we ask for help." The original Arabic emphatic particle (*iyyāka*) in this verse clearly affirms that no contender to the one and only God may be imagined, who alone is adored by the believer and beseeched for help.

The well-known exegete Muḥammad b. Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī quotes the famous Companion ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbbās who glossed "It is [only] You we worship" to mean "It is only You Whom we declare to be one and to hold in awe and in Whom we place our hope – O our Lord, there is none other than you!"[10] As for the next part of the verse which states "It is [only] You we ask for help," aṭ-Ṭabarī expansively expounds on its meaning thus:

> It is You, O our Lord, Whom we beseech for help in our adoration of only You and our obedience of You in all our matters – there is absolutely none beside You – in contrast to those who do not believe in You and who ask the idols that they worship instead of You for help in their affairs. We however ask You for help in all our matters sincerely dedicating our worship to You.[11]

The Qurʾān insists that God's unicity is absolute. The 112th chapter of the Qurʾān – called the Chapter on Sincerity (*al-Ikhlāṣ*) and on the Unicity of God (*at-Tawḥīd*), among other names – declares this unambiguously and fittingly reflects the first chapter's emphasis on God's singularity. This chapter also contains a distillation of the essential message of the Qurʾān, predicated as it is on the invitation to humans to glorify and supplicate the One God alone. Chapter 112 is therefore declared by the Prophet Muḥammad to be equivalent to a third of the Qurʾān, whose frequent recitation confers untold merit on the believer.[12]

One of the occasions of revelation provided by aṭ-Ṭabarī for Qurʾān 112 is as follows. According to the Companion Ubayy b. Kaʿb, the Arab polytheists asked

10 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 1:99.

11 Ibid.

12 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Qāsim ash-Shammāʿī ar-Rifāʿī (ed.), Beirut: Dār al-qalam n.d., "Kitāb at-Tawḥīd," 8:778.

the Prophet if he could "provide for us the genealogy of your Lord." In response, the chapter was revealed. Variant versions attributed to Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. 736/117) and Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 714/95), among others, state that it was a group of Medinan Jews who asked the Prophet a similar question and further demanded to know that since God had created Creation who had created God? Aṭ-Ṭabarī comments that in this context, *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* may be understood to constitute a categorical response to such queries about God's pedigree, his attributes, and his existence. It instructed the Prophet to respond as follows: "He is the one God (Allāh) who is the object of worship of all things; absolutely no one else is worthy of worship but Him."[13]

The Arabic statement *Allāh aḥad* ("God is one") in Qurʾān 112:1 is a stark affirmation of God's oneness. The well-known late twelfth/sixth century exegete ar-Rāzī comments that the name *Allāh* as used here may be understood to signify the totality of positive divine attributes (such as possessing all knowledge and power) while *aḥad* connotes the totality of negative divine attributes (for example, being without corporeal form and substance). The phrase *Allāh aḥad* therefore conveys a full theological understanding of God. As ar-Rāzī puts it, "The entire Qurʾān is an oyster, and the pearl is His statement 'Say, He, God is One.'"[14]

God's singularity and sole sovereignty is furthermore established in the Qurʾānic revelation because he alone is proclaimed to be the Creator of all things and he alone is in charge of everything (Qurʾān 6:102). He never sleeps or tires and, while transcendant, can be found everywhere; "the East and the West belong to God; wherever you turn, there is His Face," declares the Qurʾān (2:115). His glorious throne encompasses all of creation and no one may serve as an intercessor except by his leave, as stated in Qurʾān 2:255. This verse has justly become famous for invoking the ineffable majesty of the Divine Being in incomparably beautiful Arabic. Known in the commentary literature as "the Verse of the Throne" (*āyat al-kursī*), it is recited by Muslims on many occasions in reverential awe of the Almighty and as talismanic protection against the adversities that assail humans in this world. A *ḥadīth* refers to the Verse of the Throne as the "Mistress of the Verses of the Qurʾān." The well-known mystical theologian al-Ghazālī (1058–1111/450–505) in his commentary titled *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān* explains why this verse has achieved such an elevated status. "The Verse of the Throne," he says, is so called because it

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13 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12:740–741.

14 Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Qurʾan. A New Translation and Commentary*, New York: HarperOne, 2015, 1578–79.

> "is concerned with the divine essence, attributes and works only; it contains nothing other than these…" Now when you reflect on all these meanings [contained in the Verse of the Throne] and then recite all other verses of the Qurʾan, you will not find all these meanings – divine unity, sanctification, and explanation of high attributes – gathered together in a single one of them.[15]

Scriptural emphasis on the soteriological efficacy of monotheism historically became reflected in the principle of *irjāʾ* which evolved in roughly the eighth/second century of the Common Era in the Muslim world. The root of the Arabic term *irjāʾ* connotes both "hope" and "deferment." Because of a number of doctrinal schisms that developed in the early period, some Muslim theologians wisely came to see immense virtue in postponing or deferring to God any definitive judgment on the correctness of a particular dogma that was not explicitly referred to in the Qurʾān or *ḥadīth*. This principle was specifically formulated in contradistinction to the notion of *takfīr* ("accusation of unbelief"), resorted to by the seventh/first century schismatic group, the Khawārij. The Khawārij had mutinied against ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the fourth caliph, when the latter agreed to human arbitration to resolve the dispute between him and Muʿāwiya, the governor of Syria, over the issue of leadership of the community. The Khawārij (lit. "the seceders") claimed that arbitration was the prerogative of God alone and human arbitration was unwarranted in this case. They considered those Muslims (the overwhelming majority) who disagreed with them to have lapsed from the faith and thus to be fought against until they capitulated (a chilling harbinger of today's minoritarian extremist views).[16]

In contrast to the fissiparous doctrine of *takfīr*, the principle of *irjāʾ* stated that any Muslim who proclaimed his or her belief in the one God and the prophetic mission of Muḥammad (that is, affirmed the basic creedal statement of Islam) remained a Muslim, regardless of the commission of even gravely sinful actions, thereby holding out the hope and promise of moral rehabilitation in this world and of forgiveness in the next. A sinning Muslim was liable for punishment for criminal wrong-doing but could not be labeled an unbeliever by his co-religionists. Those who subscribed to such views were known as the Murjiʾa.[17]

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15 Al-Ghazālī, *The Jewels of the Qurʾan. Al-Ghazali's Theory*, trans. Muhammad Abu al-Quasem, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977, 75–77.

16 For a still useful broad overview of this group, see Salem, Elie Adib, *Political Theory and Institutions of the Khawārij,* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1956.

17 For a useful overview of these broad historical trends, see Watt, W. Montgomery, *Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968, 54–63.

These views became influential and came to undergird the majoritarian Sunni accommodationist world-view.

How should Muslims react when others spurn the Qurʾān's call to monotheism? A cluster of verses (Qurʾān 6:106 – 108) establishes a protocol of conduct in these circumstances. Qurʾān 6:106 clearly instructs Muslims to "Follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord, there is no God but Him," and to "Turn away from those who join other gods with Him." The following verse (Qurʾān 6:107) counsels the Prophet that it is not part of his worldly mission to turn people towards monotheism; his is one of preaching the divine message that he was entrusted with that others can embrace or reject, for "We have not made you their guardian, nor are you their keeper." The last verse in this cluster (Qurʾān 6:108) furthermore categorically proclaims a directive for interfaith conduct and a mandate for civility in the midst of religious difference that is of particular significance. It states, "Do not revile those [idols] they call upon beside God in case they revile God out of hostility." The verse therefore stresses that it is not for human beings to pronounce on the rectitude of religious doctrines since that leads to dissension and strife in this world. The Prophet Muḥammad himself is clearly warned that it is not among his duties to chastise people for their beliefs contrary to Islam, including idolatry, which represents the polar opposite of the fundamental Islamic tenets of monotheism and iconoclasm.[18]

A sampling of exegeses of this verse establishes that this fundamental message of non-compulsion in religion was emphasized by the large majority of Qurʾān commentators. The early exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767/150) in his brief exegesis of Qurʾān 6:107 states that if God had so willed, he would have prevented the Meccans from being polytheists. But he did not appoint the Prophet their guardian nor is he their guardian if they refuse to believe in the one God. As for Qurʾān 6:108, it informs us that the early Muslims used to curse the idols of the Meccans and God forbade them from doing so lest they curse God in their ignorance.[19]

Aṭ-Ṭabarī similarly comments that Qurʾān 6:107 affirms that if God had willed, the people of Mecca would have not have disbelieved in God and his messenger, but the Prophet Muḥammad was sent only as an emissary and summoner to people and not as an overseer of their actions or as one who is responsible for their maintenance and welfare. The next verse forbids Muslims from reviling the idols of the polytheists for that would cause them to revile God in their igno-

18 See my further discussion of these verses in Afsaruddin, Asma, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 199 – 200.
19 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, "Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān", ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shiḥāta (ed.), Beirut: Muʾassasat at-Taʾrīkh al-ʿArabī, 2002, 1:573.

rance.[20] Similar commentaries are given by az-Zamakhsharī (1075–1144/467–538),[21] ar-Rāzī,[22] and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373/774).[23]

The modern exegete Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) reproduces many of the essential points made by his pre-modern predecessors in connection with these two verses. But he goes further than his predecessors in asserting that Qurʾān 6:107 makes clear that God, despite being the Guardian and Overseer of humanity, does not force humans to believe in and obey Him. If he were to do so, humans would no longer be humans but become a different specie; that is to say, humans by virtue of their humanness have freedom of choice in religious matters.[24] The implication is that those who heed both reason and revelation are bound to embrace monotheism of their own free and rational volition.

The Qurʾān's invitation to faith and affirmation of the human right to choose to believe – or not – is categorically expressed in verse 56 of the second chapter, which has justly become famous in the contemporary period. This verse states, "There is no compulsion in religion." In practically any discussion of toleration in an Islamic context today, this verse will be foregrounded by many Muslims. Its obvious and unambiguous meaning is that no one may be coerced into adopting a religion against his or her will. A quick survey of some exegetical views is revealing however of a range of views on this critical verse. Aṭ-Ṭabarī in the late ninth/third century documents a spectrum of views concerning the meaning of this verse. According to one of the earliest strands of exegeses, this verse was understood to be revealed in regard to the situation of some of the early Medinan Muslims, known as the Anṣār or the Helpers, who were previously raising their children to be either Jews or Christians. When the preaching of Islam began, they wanted to forcibly convert their children to Islam. The verse was consequently revealed to specifically prohibit them from doing that and to foreground instead free volition in the selection and practice of a religion. This was the commentary offered by early Companions like Ibn Abbās, Saʿīd b. Jubayr, and others.[25]

According to the late first/seventh century exegete Mujāhid b. Jabr (b. 642/21), as cited by aṭ-Ṭabarī, the verse was revealed in reference to another group of Medinan Muslims who had grown up among the Banū Qurayza, a Jewish

20 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 5:304–5.
21 Az-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 2:385.
22 Ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 5:108–111.
23 Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-qurʾān al-ʿazīm*, Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1990, 2:156.
24 Riḍā, Rashīd, *Tafsīr al-qurʾān al-ḥakīm*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1999, 7:548–49.
25 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 3:15–16.

tribe, and who now wished to forcibly convert its members to Islam.[26] The verse was revealed to forbid them from doing so. Both "causes of revelation" (*asbāb an-nuzūl*) clearly establish that Qurʾān 2:256 prohibits the forcible conversion of non-Muslims to Islam and allows them instead to continue in their religious practices.

However, aṭ-Ṭabarī also documents that by the time we get to the second generation of Muslims, other less tolerant views had begun to surface. He quotes the Successor (from the second generation of Muslims after the Companions) Ibn Zayd (d. 798/182) who had asserted that the commandment "There is no compulsion in religion" had been abrogated. Although Ibn Zayd is not explicitly quoted as saying it, the implication is that the verse had been abrogated by the verses that give the command to fight the pagan Arabs. Earlier, another Successor Qatāda b. Diʿāma had maintained that Qurʾān 2:256 applied primarily to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) who, upon payment of the *jizya* or poll-tax to the Muslim authorities, could continue to practice their religion but it did not apply to the Arab polytheists. For them their only option was to accept Islam or face the sword. Similar views were expressed by the Successor aḍ-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 723/105).[27]

Aṭ-Ṭabarī's own preferred interpretation in the late ninth/third century is that Qurʾān 2:256 is not to be regarded as abrogated because it applies only to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians; Arab idolaters however were obligated to embrace Islam or be fought against.[28] Aṭ-Ṭabarī also underscores that the Arabic word used for "religion" in the verse is *ad-dīn*, the definite article *al-* signifies that it is a reference to Islam alone.[29] Aṭ-Ṭabarī's commentary became quite influential after him and in many ways became the predominant view at least among certain exegetes and jurists.

Historically speaking, it is not hard to understand why this perspective gained ground in influential, official circles. Qurʾān 2:256 in Arabic states, "*La ikrāha fī d-dīn.*" In its very simplicity and transparency, the verse clearly and unequivocally mandates that all humans have freedom of religion and that no one may be compelled to either accept or reject religion – any religion – since Islam is not specifically indicated, despite aṭ-Ṭabarī s attempt to derive this meaning from the verse. So transparent in fact was its mandate that some scholars, by no means all, felt compelled already by the second century of Islam to declare this verse to be abrogated, as we saw, so as to legitimate a more triumphalist

26 Ibid., 3:16–17.
27 Ibid., 3:17–18.
28 Ibid., 3:18.
29 Ibid., 3:19.

world-view that asserted the superiority of Islam over all other religions, often for political reasons. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, it should be noted, was very close to the Abbasid ruling elite of his time; for the purposes of empire-building, it was useful to promote Islam as a conquest-based world religion which perspective then could be deployed, at least in certain contexts, as a mandate for expanding the imperial realms.

Such scholars have been challenged by others, both in the pre-modern and modern periods, who categorically stated that this verse remained normative for all times and its basic injunction of non-compulsion in religion could never be violated. Criticism of some of the classical exegeses of Qurʾān 2:256 and of the principle of *naskh* in general, has, not surprisingly, been the sharpest in the modern period when freedom of conscience has become a moral desideratum.[30] *Naskh*, it should be noted, refers to the principle of abrogation, which, according to many pre-modern exegetes, allows for certain earlier verses to be superseded or nullified by later verses.

Another verse which clearly conduces to tolerance is Qurʾān 5:48 which states,

> For every one of you We have appointed a law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community, but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has given you. So hasten to do good works!

Turning to aṭ-Ṭabarī once again, he fully recognizes that every religious community or nation (*qawm*) has its own religious law or tradition (*shirʿa*) and way of doing things (*minhaj*). He quotes Qatāda b. Diʿāma who had stated that religion is one but religious laws or traditions (*sunan*) are many. Thus the Torah has its own religious law (*sharīʿa*), as does the Gospel and the Qurʾān, which prescribes and proscribes various things so that God may know those who obey Him from those who do not. However, the religion that was proclaimed by numerous prophets through time is one and it is the only one acceptable to God: that is to say, the religion that is founded on monotheism and sincere belief in God.[31]

Contraposed to this inclusivist view of religious traditions is that of others who averred that the verse actually referred only to those who embraced Islam as having a religious law and tradition. Among these exegetes was Mujāhid b. Jabr who maintained that only the Qurʾān, and no other scripture, had such a religious law and way. Once again, we see exclusivist views beginning to arise already in the second century of Islam which directly contradicted the prima

30 See my discussion of these issues in Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues*, 124 – 128.
31 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4:610.

facie meaning of Qurʾānic verses, such as 5:48. Revelation became the site for such contestations that had considerable implications for self- and communal identity.

3 Revelation as Oral and Written Text and the Merits of Its Recitation

In later theological texts, the Qurʾān is specifically referred to as *al-waḥy al-matlū* ("the recited revelation") while the *ḥadīth* (sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad) is referred to as *al-waḥy ghayr al-matlū* ("the unrecited revelation"). This distinction between the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* on the basis of whether it is recited or not underscores the liturgical role of the Qurʾān in Muslim worship. The name 'Qurʾān' after all refers to a text that is both recited and read – and points to both its oral and written modalities. William Graham, among others, has rightly emphasized the Qurʾān's role as an oral text in Muslim religious life and the primacy of its orality over its written form in Islam's early centuries.[32]

The Qurʾān's role as a liturgical text explains, at least partially, why chronology was not a factor in the final redaction of the sacred text after the Prophet's death in 11/632. Compared to both the Hebrew and the Christian Bible, the entire Qurʾān is meant to be recited. Muslim worshippers recite selections from the Qurʾān in their daily obligatory prayers, during special occasions marking the passages of life – birth, marriage, death, etc. – and during other mundane, quotidian events. The Qurʾān after all served as both an oral and written texts from its very beginning. Traditional sources inform us that while the Prophet orally communicated the revelations received by him, his Companions committed them to writing. Even after the codification of the sacred text, its oral dimension remained (and remains) an integral part of the Qurʾānic revelation.

A possible tension may be discerned in early Islamic literature that refers to the oral and written dimensions of the Qurʾānic revelation and how the faithful accommodated themselves to these dual dimensions. This tension sometimes comes through in the literary genre known as the *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* which discusses the merits or excellences of the Qurʾān. One may read into many of the

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32 Graham, William A., *Beyond the Written Word. Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 88–92; Graham, William A., "The Qurʾan as Spoken Word: An Islamic Contribution to the Understanding of Scripture," in: Richard Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies,* 23–40, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985.

reports contained in the *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* works the insecurities generated in a society that is rapidly making the transition from a society based on oral transmission to that based on written transmission. Starting with Nabia Abbott, modern scholars have marshalled impressive arguments and a considerable body of evidence to indicate that this transition occurred much earlier than has been commonly assumed and that written documents were prevalent as early as the late first/seventh and early eigth/second centuries. Such a transition brought about an attendant transfer of religious authority and social power from the traditional piety-minded elite to an emerging professional class of religious scholars, whose expertise was defined in large measure by mastery of the written text. Abbott has pointed to this historical tension between oral and written transmission in Islam's first century which found moral overtones. She states that those groups who represented "pious scholarship" and, therefore, were "orthodox," were the ones who "struggled to hold onto the idea of the absolute primacy of oral transmission." [33] This attitude is believed to have stemmed primarily from ʿUmar's edict against the writing down of *ḥadīth* as reported by some sources.[34]

The early resistance to dealing with the Qurʾān as primarily a written text is encoded in a number of *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* works. One report nicely encapsulates the apprehension generated by the ascendancy of the *muṣḥaf* (the written Qurʾān copy) over oral transmission. The account states that when ʿIkrima b. Abī Jahl (d. 723–24/105) heard that the *muṣḥaf* had become widespread, he swooned and, apparently, on coming to, lamented, "It is the speech of my Lord (*kalām rabbī*); it is the speech of my Lord!" The emphasis on speech (*kalām*) draws attention to what Brinkley Messick has termed "a culturally specific logocentrism" in Islam. This logocentrism privileged the spoken word for "while recitation was thought to maintain a reliable constancy of meaning, the secondary medium of writing was seen as harboring a prospect of misinterpretation."[35] Such a recitational logocentrism would be severely challenged by the rise to prominence of a class of professional scholars and scribes by the ninth/third century whose discursive medium became the written word.

The trend towards a preference for written transmission of sacred revelation finds reflection in a statement by the thirteenth/seventh century Shāfiʿī jurist scholar Yaḥyā b. Sharaf ad-Dīn an-Nawawī (1233–1277/631–676) who exhorts

33 Abbott, Nabia, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri. Historical Texts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 1:131; 2:24.

34 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taqyīd al-ʿilm*, Yūsuf al-ʿIshsh (ed.), Beirut: Dār iḥyāʾ as-sunna an-nabawiyya, 1974, 2:19; 49–53.

35 Messick, Brinkley, *The Calligraphic State. Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 25.

the believer to recite from the *muṣḥaf* rather than from memory (*ʿalā ẓahri ʾl-qalb*) since "looking at the written text is a desirable [act of] worship," and, he continues, "it has been reported by many that the righteous forebears (*as-salaf*) would recite from the *muṣḥaf*."[36] This may in fact reflect historical truth. From another perspective, these reports clearly make a religious virtue out of the bookish erudition of the *ʿulamāʾ*, a trait that is grafted retroactively onto the moral exemplars of the early centuries of Islam to create a pious precedent.

The rich *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* literature is therefore a repository of some of these critical debates within the Muslim community and preserves for us the tension between the oral and written aspects of revelation and its consequences for the formation of individual and communal piety. This literature also attests to the growth of praise traditions specifically concerning the Qurʾān that exaggerated the recompense (*thawāb*) earned by the believer in reciting certain chapters from the holy book, such as *al-Fātiḥa* (chapter 1) and *at-Tawḥīd* (chapter 112), or specific verses, such as Qurʾān 2:255, which, as we previously noted, became known as the Verse of the Throne (*āyat al-kursī*).

The controversial nature of this issue is reflected in the following accounts recorded about the 112th chapter known as sura *at-Tawḥīd* or *al-Ikhlāṣ*. The unusual merit ascribed to this *sūra* is best exemplified in the prophetic report commonly related in regard to it, "Say, he is God the One," equals a third of the Quʾrān. The Andalusian scholar Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (978 – 1070/368 – 463) reports that when the famous jurist Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (780 – 855/164 – 241) was asked regarding the probative value of this report, he did not signify his approval of it. He also references Isḥāq b. Rāḥawayh (d. 853/238) who had explained this report in the following way: he said that when God made His speech more excellent than the rest of speech, He assigned greater recompense to the recitation of part of it [sc. His speech] in order that people would be induced to teach it. Ibn Rāḥawayh further dismisses the understanding of this tradition to imply that reciting it thrice earns for the reciter the reward of having recited the entire Qurʾān; "this would not be possible even if one were to recite it two hundred times." Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr himself counseled that "Silence on this matter is better than speech regarding it and more sound."[37] Clearly, there was a reluctance on the part of early scholars to consider parts of the Qurʾān to be more excellent than others. After all, was not all of God's speech equally excellent and beautiful?

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36 Fakhr ad-Dīn al-Baʿalbakkī, *Mukhtaṣar Tibyān*, Ms. Leiden University Library, OR 1525, fol. 42b. For further discussion, see Afsaruddin, Asma, "The Excellences of the Qurʾān: Textual Sacrality and the Organization of Early Islamic Society," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122:1 (2002), 1 – 24.

37 As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-qurʾān,* Beirut: Dār ibn Kathīr, 1993, 2: 1140 – 41.

Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (1445 – 1505/849 – 911) in his *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-qurʾān* poses the question that has troubled scholars in general: is there anything in the Qurʾān [to be considered] more excellent than something else [in the Qurʾān]? He notes that prominent scholars like Abū ʾl-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (ca. 873 – ca. 935/260 – 324), Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013/403), and Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 965/354) forbade such comparisons for "all [of it] is the word of God; otherwise, the preferred [portion] presumes the deficiency of the less preferred [portion]." It was said that the jurist Mālik b. Anas (d. 796/179) also disliked that any *sūra* be repeated more than others. On the other hand, certain scholars like the afore-mentioned Isḥāq b. Rāḥawayh, Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (1076 – 1148/468 – 543), and al-Ghazālī, considered "preference" (*at-tafḍīl*) permissible on account of prophetic *ḥadīth*s to this effect. In fact, as as-Suyūṭī points out, al-Ghazālī in his *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān* comes out very strongly in favor of the permissibility of showing preference for some chapters over others and asserts the existence of prophetic precedence for it. He says,

> Follow the one who, peace and blessings be upon him, was entrusted with the message (*ar-risāla*), for he was the one to whom the Qurʾān was revealed, and the prophetic reports indicate the exalted status of certain verses and the doubling of reward in the case of certain revealed chapters. And he, peace and blessings be upon him, said further, "the Opening Chapter of the Book is the most excellent chapter of the Qurʾān; the Verse of the Throne is the mistress of the verses of the Qurʾān; Yā Sīn is the heart of the Qurʾān; and 'Say, He is God, the One' equals a third of the Qurʾān."

Despite the fact that a number of prominent scholars resorted to such exaggerated praise for certain sections of the Qurʾān, certain, and perhaps more punctilious, *ḥadīth* scholars from the later period took exception to this development. Ibn al-Jawzī (1126 – 1200/510 – 597), az-Zarkashī, and as-Suyūṭī, for example, expressed their dismay over the proliferation of *faḍāʾil* reports which assigned greater merit to certain portions of the Qurʾān over others and their recording by respectable scholars. They have questioned the motives of those who circulated these exaggerated accounts, mainly because critical scrutiny of the *isnād*s (chains of transmission) of such accounts have revealed the presence of transmitters with less than sterling reputations.

For example, Ibn al-Jawzī takes exception to the following *ḥadīth* attributed to the Companion Ubayy b. Kaʿb, related below at some length since it is frequently cited in this kind of literature:

> The Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, displayed the Qurʾān to me twice in the year in which he died and said, "Gabriel, peace be on him, has commanded me to recite to you the Qurʾān and he recites greetings to you." … When the Messenger of God,

peace and blessings be upon him, recited to me, I asked him if I had a special [role to play]; "if so, impart to me specially the merit of the Qurʾān according to what God has taught you and informed you about." He replied, "Yes, Ubayy. Every time a Muslim recites the opening chapter of the Book, he is given as recompense the equivalent of having recited a third of the Qurʾān and of having given alms to every believing man and woman. Whoever recites al-ʿImrān is given safe passage on the bridge of Jahannam for every verse in it; whoever recites Sūrat an-Nisāʾ is given as recompense the equivalent of offering alms to each person who inherits from him; whoever reads al-Māʾida is given ten rewards and ten demerits are wiped out …" And he mentioned the rewards that accompanied each *sūra* until the end of the Qurʾān.[38]

Az-Zarkashī states that the above *ḥadīth* attributed to Ubayy b. Kaʿb regarding the merits of each *sūra* is a fabricated one. He further reports that Nūḥ b. Abī Maryam was once asked how he had come to relate a tradition from ʿIkrima reporting from Ibn ʿAbbās regarding the merits of the Qurʾān chapter by chapter (*fī faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān sūratan sūratan*). He replied, "I saw people turning away from the Qurʾān and concerning themselves with the *fiqh* [jurisprudence] of Abū Ḥanīfa and the Maghāzī of Muḥammad b. Isḥāq and thus I fabricated these *ḥadīth*s in their entirety."[39]

Az-Zarkashī goes on to criticize the Qurʾān exegetes, al-Wāḥidī (d. 1076/468) and ath-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035/427), who consequently came to list such praise accounts at the beginning of each *sūra* in their commentaries, with the exception of az-Zamakhsharī who appended these accounts to each chapter at the end. Ibn al-Jawzī passes a similar negative judgement on al-Wāḥidī and ath-Thaʿlabī for such a practice and says that this is not surprising on their part since they were not one of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* (a reference to hadith scholars; implying that they had less scruples about reporting unreliable traditions). Ibn al-Jawzī further rebukes Ibn Abī Dāʾūd as-Sijistānī (844 – 929/230 – 316) for having included this report in a work that he composed on the *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* in spite of being aware of the spurious nature of the *ḥadīth*. Ibn al-Jawzī then goes on to impugn the reliability of some of the narrators who related this tradition; for example, Mukhallad b. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid who was described by Ibn Ḥibbān as "repudiated (*munkar*) of *ḥadīth*."[40] ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 797/181) was of the opinion

38 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-mawḍūʾāt*, ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Muḥammad ʿUthmān (ed.), Medina, 1966 – 68, 1:239; As-Suyūṭī, *al-Laʾālī ʾl-maṣnūʿa fī l-aḥādīth al-mawḍūʿa*, Beirut, n.d., 1:226 ff.
39 Az-Zarkashi, *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, M. A. F. Ibrahim (ed.), Dar Ihya al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1957 – 9, 1:432.
40 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mawḍūʾāt*, 1:240.

that the *zanādiqa*[41] had fabricated the tradition attributed to Ubayy b. Kaʿb. Another report states that a certain *shaykh* related the above tradition from Ubayy to Muʾammal b. Ismāʿīl (d. c. 821/206), a Baṣran scholar. The *shaykh*'s transmitters were traced back to the source who was discovered to be another *shaykh* living in ʿAbbādān who was one of the Ṣūfīs (*qawm min al-mutaṣawwifa*). When this *shaykh* was queried regarding his original transmitter, he replied, "No one related it to me. But when we saw that the people had turned away from the Qurʾān, we fabricated this tradition for them so as to turn their faces towards the Qurʾān."[42]

These reports may thus be seen as having been generated against the backdrop of a "battle of piety" waged by various interest groups as they jostled for prominence in a society that was still in flux, in which prominence was defined in terms of greater moral excellence (*faḍl/faḍīla*).[43] Moral excellence itself would come to be largely predicated on the possession of knowledge; how this knowledge should be defined provided the point of departure for laying claims to this kind of excellence. The *ahl al-Qurʾān* (Qurʾān scholars) insisted on the primacy and self-sufficiency of knowledge derived from close study of the Qurʾān itself and had little use for the organized, hierarchical system of knowledge developed by the professional scholars. Ultimately, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and the *ahl al-fiqh* (jurists) would win the day; their elaborate taxonomy of the *ḥadīth* literature that could generate certain knowledge and thus help elucidate the revealed law made irrelevant, even seditious (hence the label *az-zanādiqa* as deployed by Ibn al-Mubārak) the less rigorous and relatively unschooled piety of other groups, such as the *ahl al-taṣawwuf* (the Sufis or mystics).

4 Revelation as Beautiful and Inimitable Text: the Doctrine of *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*

Because of its divine provenance, the Qurʾān also stresses that its language is in clear and eloquent Arabic that defies human emulation. Divine revelation

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41 This was a term used "loosely for "heretic, renegade, unbeliever" and more specifically for a Manichaean; see the article "zindiḳ," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, Peri Bearman et al. (ed.), online version.

42 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mawḍūʿāt*, 1:240 – 241.

43 See my discussion of the importance of this concept in conjunction with *sābiqa* (precedence) in Afsaruddin, Asma, *Excellence and Precedence. Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership,* Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002.

must be both accessible to the human mind and clothed in elegant language. Qurʾān 55:1–2 states, "(God) Most Gracious! It is He who has taught the Qurʾān;" furthermore, "We know indeed that they say: 'It is a man that teaches him.' The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear" (Qurʾān 16: 103). Two more verses link the Arabic language with communication of wisdom and comprehensibility. Qurʾān 12:2 says, "We have sent it down as an Arabic Qurʾān, in order that you may learn wisdom;" and "A revelation from (God), Most Gracious, Most Merciful. A Book, whereof the verses are explained in detail, a Qurʾān in Arabic, for people who understand" (Qurʾān 41:2–3).

God's words are inevitably beautiful since he himself is beautiful; the faithful who fulfill the commands contained in revelation partake in this beauty. Several verses in the Qurʾān repeat the phrase "those who do what is beautiful" for referring to those who carry out good deeds and conduct themselves with honor and dignity in daily life: "The mercy of God is near to those who do what is beautiful (*al-muḥsinīn*)" (7:56). The Qurʾān also exhorts: "Do what is beautiful. God loves those who do what is beautiful" (*wa-aḥsinū; inna ʾllāha yuḥibbu ʾl-muḥsinīn*; 2:195).

The perfection of God's word in the Qurʾān may therefore be understood to be a reflection of divine beauty and uniqueness – just as God is without peer so are his pronouncements communicated to human beings. The inimitability of the Qurʾān (*iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*) consequently became a matter of dogma underscoring the peerless language of the sacred text reflecting its divine authorship. Although the Qurʾān testifies to the presence of miracles or signs given to various prophets, such as Moses and Jesus, it denies that the Prophet Muḥammad performed any miracles except for the transmission of the Qurʾān (29:50). When Muḥammad was accused by his enemies of having forged the revelations received by him, the Qurʾān came to his defense and challenged mere mortals to produce chapters similar in eloquence and wisdom to its own.

> This Qurʾān is not such as can be produced by other than God; on the contrary it is a confirmation (of revelations) that went before it, and a fuller explanation of the Book – wherein there is no doubt – from the Lord of the Worlds. Or do they say, "He forged it?" Say: "Bring them a chapter like unto it, and call (to your aid) anyone you can, besides God, if indeed you speak the truth!" (Qurʾān 10:37–38)

As Mohammed Arkoun remarks, "Revelation in the Qurʾān is at first a result of linguistic evidence: the syntactic, semantic, semiotic structure of the Qurʾānic discourse imposes a space of communication totally articulated to impose a no-

tion and a content of Revelation."[44] The eloquent and mellifluous Arabic of scripture points to its divine author and establishes the centrality of language in communication between the divine and human realms.

In his exegesis of Qurʾān 10:37, aṭ-Ṭabarī underscores the significance of this internal linguistic evidence for the Qurʾān's divine provenance. He states that by the revelation of this verse, "the Exalted says that no one but God could have created this Qurʾān for no created being has such ability." The Qurʾān was revealed to "Muḥammad, His servant, so as to give the lie to those polytheists who remarked that 'this is [mere] poetry and divination.'"[45] The Qurʾān is furthermore a confirmation of scriptures revealed to previous prophets, including the Torah and the Gospels, and provides further amplification of the duties imposed upon humans.[46]

Az-Zamakhsharī in his exegesis of Qurʾān 10:37 similarly comments that the Qurʾān is a confirmation and elucidation of previous revelations by "the Lord of the worlds" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*). The next verse (Qurʾān 10:38) challenges those who accused the Prophet of fabricating the revelations and prompts Muḥammad to address his detractors thus: "Since you are my peer in Arabic and eloquence, then produce a chapter like [a Qurʾānic chapter] that would equal its eloquence (*al-balāgha*) and its beauty of composition (*ḥusn an-naẓm*).[47] Az-Zamakhsharī concludes from this verse that no one but God could have produced such chapters of unparalleled beauty and eloquence. Those who disbelieved in their divine provenance were simply doing so out of rebellion and obstinacy (*tamarrudan wa ʿinādan*) and by blindly following in the footsteps of their forebears (*taqlīdan lil-abāʾ*).[48]

Ar-Rāzī in the early twelfth/sixth century is more forceful in asserting the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān's composition, particularly in light of the fact that Muḥammad was unlettered (*ummī*) and therefore incapable of producing such a text on his own. He compares Qurʾān 10:37 to Qurʾān 2:23, which similarly challenges the unbelievers to produce a chapter comparable to a Qurʾānic chapter. Ar-Rāzī comments that Qurʾān 2:23 invites the reader to ponder how a man like Muḥammad who had not studied with anyone nor read any books could have acquired the ability and the necessary knowledge to produce a text like the Qurʾānic text. In the face of such inability, the result must be a miracle (*ḥay-*

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44 Havemann, Axel/Johansen, Baber (eds), *Gegenwart als Geschichte. Islamwissenschaftliche Studien*, Leiden: Brill, 1988, 67.
45 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 6:561.
46 Ibid.
47 Az-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 3:137.
48 Ibid., 3:137–38.

thu ẓahara al-ʿajz, ẓahara al-muʿjiz). The verse suggests not so much that the *sūra* itself is a miracle but rather that the emanation of the Qurʾānic revelation from a man like Muḥammad who was unlettered and unschooled is to be regarded as a miraculous event. However, ar-Rāzī understands Qurʾān 10:37 to be asserting that Qurʾānic chapters in themselves are to be considered a miracle because human beings, however learned and well-trained and reflective, would be utterly incapable of reproducing God's compositional virtuosity.[49]

Ar-Rāzī's more detailed delineation of the concept of the inimitability of the Qurʾān indicates to us that by the twelfth/sixth century this concept had become doctrinally entrenched and widespread. This is corroborated by the fact that already by the tenth/fourth century, a new literary genre focused on the concept of the *iʿjaz al-Qurʾān* makes its appearance and becomes a fairly prolific one thereafter. The Muʿtazilī scholar an-Naẓẓām (ca. 845/230) was one of the first to deal with this topic and to pave the way for more treatises to be written on this topic. In the following century ar-Rummānī (909–994/296–384) composed his *an-Nukat fī iʿjāz al-qurʾān* and al-Khaṭṭābī (b. 931/319) wrote the *Bayān iʿjāz al-qurʾān*. A number of motivating factors may be identified for the emergence of this genre starting in the ninth/third century: 1) as a response to the general Muʿtazilī denial of miracles, a position that was shared by the philosophers; 2) as a challenge to the claim of those later termed Sufis to be able to perform miracles (*karamāt*), and 3) as a reaction to the rise of the Shuʿūbiyya movement spearheaded by non-Arabs, particularly Persians, who asserted their cultural superiority over the Arabs. Against these groups, mainstream Sunnī Arab scholars were compelled to articulate a clearer conception of the Qurʾān as Muḥammad's miracle which was different from the extraordinary feats that some Sufi luminaries claimed to have performed. Thus al-Bāqillānī wrote his *al-Farq bayna al-muʿjizāt wa-ʾl-karamāt* intended to elucidate the differences between these two categories of supernatural acts while others undertook the task of extolling the superiority of the Arabic language over other languages. The brilliant litterateur al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869/255), although only half-Arab, took up cudgels against the Shuʿūbiyya in an effort to prove this point. Arabic of course was the language of the Qurʾān and therefore defense of the Arabic language led further to an espousal of the unparalleled aesthetic nature of the Qurʾānic text.[50]

There is another development starting in the aftermath of the ʿAbbasid revolution in the middle of the eighth/second century that is of particular interest to

49 Ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 6:254.
50 For this discussion, see Vasalou, Sophia, "The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qurʾan: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 4 (2002), 23–53.

us since it concerns inter-faith relations. During this period we see the rise of apologetic and polemical writings against Islam on the part of Christian authors, like the Jacobite Ḥabīb b. Khidma Abū Raʾiṭa (d. ca. 851/236), who were alarmed by the prospect of increasing Christian conversions to Islam in the more inclusive society established by the ʿAbbasids.[51] This in turn instigated the writing of polemical treatises by Muslim authors against Christianity, such as the one by the Zaydī imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 860/246) and the afore-mentioned al-Jāḥiẓ, both of whom wrote works titled *ar-Radd ʿala an-naṣāra* in the ninth/third century. Needless to say, Christian apologetics focused on the miracles performed by Christ which were regarded as proving the truth of Christianity as opposed to Islam which lacked such authenticating miracles.[52] It is therefore possible to understand a greater Muslim preoccupation with the notion of the inimitability of the Qurʾān as at least a partial response to Christian apologetics in this period.

In the early period, there were two schools of thought regarding the constitution of the *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, based on whether their proponents were of the opinion that its inimitability was located within the sacred text itself or subscribed to the view that it emanated from a quality or factor extraneous to it. The well-known scholar of Qurʾānic sciences az-Zarkashī describes these two positions in his *al-Burhān fi ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*. Those who argued for an external impetus tended to be from the Muʿtazila; notably among them was an-Naẓẓām who stated that *iʿjāz* primarily referred to God preventing human beings from acquiring the ability to imitate the Qurʾān (*ṣarf*).[53] The theory of *ṣarfa* coincided to some extent with the Muʿtazilī belief in the created Qurʾān since that would preclude the possibility of continuous divine intervention in the worldly realm.[54]

A greater majority of scholars however drew upon internal textual evidence for establishing the inimitable nature of the Qurʾān, focusing primarily on stylistics and linguistic eloquence. One of the best-known exponents of this school of thought is the afore-mentioned al-Bāqillānī whose *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* provides a detailed analysis of this concept and has rightly become famous in literary and Qurʾānic studies. For al-Bāqillānī, the miraculous eloquence of the Qurʾān rests on the stylistic composition of the sacred text (*naẓm al-Qurʾān*) whose excellence does not derive from the usual rhetorical figures associated with *balāgha* (eloquence), such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, conciseness, and others. Rather,

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51 Griffith, Sidney, "Habib b. Khidma Abu Raʾitah, a Christian *mutakallim* of the First Abbasid Century," *Oriens Christianus* 64 (1980), 161–201.

52 Watt, Montgomery W., *Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973, 179.

53 Az-Zarkashi, *Burhān*, 2:90 ff.

54 Vasalou, "Miraculous Eloquence," 30.

the Qurʾān's inimitable nature is grounded in the fact that its compositional eloquence defies all existing literary forms. In other words, the Qurʾān's literary excellence is *sui generis* and is therefore proof of its miraculous inimitability which in turn points to its divine provenance.[55]

Another well-known work on *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* is by ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1081/474 or 1078/471), whose *Dalāʾil iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* has become a classic in the field. Like al-Bāqillānī before him, al-Jurjānī also understands the Qurʾān's inimitability to inhere in its linguistic excellence, the evidence for which can be derived from the text itself. He particularly focuses on the syntactic features of the Qurʾānic text which confer upon it its unique stylistic form (*naẓm*) that cannot be replicated by any human being. This fundamental point is expressed by al-Jurjānī in the following way:

> What is this imposing excellence, this dazzling superiority and wondrous construction that occurred for the first time in the Qurʾān, such that it rendered all creatures, without exception, powerless, overcoming the powers and capabilities of the eloquent and articulate ones and binding notion and thought until the orators like braying he-camels went silent and the utterance of the speakers ceased to be, and until no tongue stirred and no clear speech manifested itself and no power helped and no flint yielded a spark for any of them and the point of no sword penetrated, and until it made the valley overflow upon them with inability and seized from them the outlets of speech forever.[56]

Al-Jurjānīʾs *Dalāʾil* has been praised as a mature literary work that expounds a sophisticated theory of language and meaning in the context of elaborating the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qurʾān. It is also clear from this work that by this period a language-based discussion of the *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* could not be divorced from the larger theological issues of the time.[57]

Since the eleventh/fifth century, the inimitability of the Qurʾān – both in terms of its extraordinary content and literary excellence – has become an accepted doctrinal tenet for all Muslims and uniquely defines the Muslim's believer's relation to revelation. The prominent modern Egyptian Muslim scholar and reformer, Muḥammad Abduh (d. 1905), unambiguously articulates the importance of this doctrine in the following manner:

> The matchlessness of the Qurʾān is an actuality beyond the powers of humanity. Its eloquence remained unparalleled. We say deliberately "the powers of humanity." For the

55 Al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, I.D. A. Haydar (ed.), Beirut, n.d., passim., Vasalou, "Miraculous Eloquence," 33–39.

56 Al-Jurjānī, *Dalāʾil al-Qurʾān*, 9, trans. Margaret Larkin, "The Inimitability of the Qurʾan. Two Perspectives," *Religion and Literature* 20/1 (1988), 31.

57 Larkin, "Inimitability of the Qurʾan," 38 ff.

> Qurʾān came to an Arabic-speaking prophet. Writing was well-known among the Arabs everywhere at that time, to a degree of excellence already described, and in the context of intense hostility already noted. Yet for all that the Arabs quite failed to produce from their whole mental effort anything to oppose to it. It is then irrational to think that some Persian, or Indian or Greek, could have commanded such Arabic skill to achieve what had defeated the Arabs themselves. The powers of the Arabs quite failed them, despite their having comparable origins and education to Muḥammad, and many of them special advantages of science and study. All of this is proof positive that the words of the Qurʾān are in no way the sort of thing to originate from man. No! it was a unique Divine gift to him on whose lips it came. And so its statements about their inability to equal it and its readiness to meet head on all that their skill could contrive are plain proofs of its assurance as to its identity. The speaker is undoubtedly the Lord, who knows the unseen and the visible, and no man preaching and counselling in the ordinary way. This is the conclusion of all the evidences now accumulated, of contents quite impossible to merely human intelligence to sustain for so long. And thus, the great wonder of the Qurʾān is proved.[58]

For ʿAbduh, as for other theologians, the *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* is an article of faith that underscored more than the aesthetic uniqueness of the sacred text in terms of its style and content – it was a formal and necessary acknowledgement of its miraculous provenance. For believers, revelation is, above all, a unique divine gift to humankind anchored in God's limitless solicitude for His creation.

5 The Qurʾān as Primordial Revelation

The Qurʾān's unassailability as scripture is connected with the concept of "the Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*) mentioned in the Qurʾān itself: "This is indeed a Glorious Qurʾān (inscribed) in the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*) (Qurʾān 85:21–22; cf. 56:77–78). The Qurʾān describes *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ* as having everything – small and big – recorded in it (54:53). The Preserved Tablet is described elsewhere in the Qurʾān as *umm al-kitāb* ("the source of scriptural revelation"; cf. Qurʾān 13:39). According to aṭ-Ṭabarī, early exegetes like Mujāhid b. Jabr understood these terms to be identical.[59] Divine revelation is based on this celestial archetype, on account of which it is "protected from alteration and falsification," says aṭ-Ṭabarī.[60]

In extra-Qurʾānic literature, the process of revelation is often described as having taken place in three stages. Some scholars mention that in the first

58 ʿAbduh, Muḥammad, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Ishaq Musaʾad and Kenneth Cragg, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966, 121.
59 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12:531.
60 Ibid.

stage, the Qurʾān, the word of God, was written on the Preserved Tablet in the celestial realm. In the second stage God revealed the entire Qurʾān from the Preserved Tablet to the lower heavens, in a place called "The House of Majesty" (*Bayt al-ʿizza*). This revelation occurred in Ramadan, on the Night of Decree or Power (*laylat al-qadr*), as referenced in Qurʾān 2:185 which states, "The month of Ramadan is the month in which the Qurʾān was revealed;" and "We have sent it (the Qurʾān) down, on a Blessed Night" (Qurʾān 44:3). The Qurʾān later specifies this Blessed Night as "the Night of Decree/Power" (97:1).

The third stage represents the final stage of revelation when Gabriel brought those portions of the Qurʾān which God commanded him to bring to the Prophet Muḥammad. This gradual revelation occurred over a period of twenty-three years.[61] Primarily oral in nature during the lifetime of the Prophet, the revelation was also written down on pieces of bark or parchment, and other writing materials at hand, as the traditional sources inform us. The final codification of the Qurʾān would occur during the time of the third Rightly-Guided caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 655/35).[62]

A particular verse – Qurʾān 25:32 – is often invoked in the literature to explain why the Qurʾān was revealed piecemeal over a period of time to the Prophet Muḥammad rather than as a complete text all at once. This verse states, "And those who disbelieve say, 'Why was the Qurʿan not revealed to him all at once?' It is that way so that We may strengthen thereby your heart. And We have recited it in a measured way."

In his brief commentary on Qurʾān 25:32, aṭ-Ṭabarī records the views of a number of exegetes who affirm that this verse establishes the gradual, progressive nature of the Qurʾānic revelation in the course of over twenty years, so that it could be responsive to specific questions asked by people over time. The word *tartīl* ("gradual revelation") is understood to imply both gradualness and precision in reading/recitation. According to other authorities, among them ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān b. Zayd,[63] *tartīl* is glossed as "elucidation and explanation or commentary" (*at-tabyīn wa ʾt-tafsīr*). This view stresses the simultaneity of exegesis inherent in the act of recitation or reading itself and the importance of measured and

61 As-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, 1:129 – 134.
62 Al-Aʿẓamī, Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *The History of the Qurʾanic Text. From Revelation to Compilation*, London: UK Islamic Academy, 2003.
63 This is the Successor ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Ibn Zayd b. Aslam al-ʿAdawī al-Madanī, son of the well-known Companion Zayd b. Aslam, from whom the former transmitted *ḥadīth*s. Ibn Zayd was known to have composed a Qurʾān commentary, which was used by aṭ-Ṭabarī, as well as a work titled *Kitāb an-nāsikh wa-ʾl-mansūkh*; cf. Sezgin, Fuat, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967, 1:38.

deliberate reflection on the word of God, establishing a protocol for engaging Scripture.[64]

Az-Zamakhshari comments that in contrast to the three previous scriptures (the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel, according to Muslim tradition) which came down all at once, the Qurʾān was revealed piecemeal over a period of time. He says that either the Quraysh or the Jews of Medina may have uttered this statement. Az-Zamakhsharī further remarks that it would have made no difference to the Qurʾān's inimitable nature or its cogency as a divine proof-text whether it came down all at once or *seriatim*. It was preferable however for the Qurʾān to come down gradually, he says, because it allowed the Prophet to memorize it more easily, particularly since, unlike the previous messengers, he could neither read nor write. Like aṭ-Ṭabarī, az-Zamakhsharī also emphasizes that the piecemeal revelation of the Qurʾānic verses allowed the Qurʾān to be responsive to specific historical circumstances and to the concerns of the believers, and also allowed for the possibility of the phenomenon of abrogation.[65]

Ar-Rāzī similarly gives several reasons for the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān, one of which is that since Muḥammad could not read nor write, this manner of oral revelation was conducive to memorization and allowed for accurate preservation of the words by the Prophet. This is in contrast to the written Torah which could be transmitted all at once and which the literate Moses could read. Another reason is that if the Qurʾān had been revealed all at once, says ar-Rāzī, then the entire divine law would have been imposed immediately on humans, which would have represented an unusual hardship for them.[66]

As-Suyūṭī similarly states that the phrase "We may strengthen thereby your heart" (*li-nuthabbita bihi fuʾādaka*) was understood by some scholars as referring to facilitating memorization on the part of the Prophet who was unlettered and who would therefore be able to commit to memory the revelation only if it descended *seriatim*. According to other scholars, the Qurʾānic text did not come down all at once because some verses were abrogated while others functioned as abrogating ones.[67]

It is worthy of note that in their understanding of this verse, our classical exegetes and scholars read not only particularity and singularity into the mode of the revelation of the Qurʾān – its piecemeal nature and rootedness in specific historical circumstances – but also affirmation of the finality of the Qurʾānic message and its comprehensiveness at the same time. Ar-Rāzī in particular em-

64 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 9:387.
65 Az-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 4:347–48.
66 Ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 8:457.
67 As-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, 1:134.

phasizes that revelation does not represent an imposition on human beings; so that the manner of the Qurʾānic revelation *ad seriatim* became an expression of divine solicitude for the well-being of human beings that took into consideration the frailty of human intelligence. As such, as God facilitates human receptivity towards revelation and fosters understanding of its content, the achievement of which represents the highest purpose of humankind. This may be understood then as a testament to the universality of the Qurʾānic message because it conforms to the human ability to understand and implement it everywhere and at any time.

6 Revelation as a Manifestation of God's Mercy and Justice

The revelation of the Qurʾān to the Prophet Muḥammad continues the process of God's self-disclosure to humanity through His revealed scriptures before the advent of the Qurʾān, as stated in Qurʾān 26:196. A cluster of Qurʾānic verses (4:163–65) names the various prophets who were vouchsafed divine revelation prior to Muḥammad:

> We have sent you revelation as we sent it to Noah and the messengers after him: We sent revelation to Abraham and Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some messengers We have already told you the story; of others We have not – and to Moses God spoke directly. Messengers who gave good tidings as well as warnings, that humankind, after (the coming) of the messengers should have no proof against God; for God is Exalted in Power and Wise.

God's communication with humankind through direct revelation to His prophets through time is therefore an act of mercy which provides continual guidance to erring humans by bringing good tidings (*bushrā*) and warnings (*indhār*). It is furthermore a manifestation of his justice towards humanity, who can be held accountable for their deeds in the hereafter precisely because God has revealed his will and his design for creation through his selected emissaries.

In his exegesis of Qurʾān 4:163–65, ar-Rāzī stresses this aspect of divine justice and human accountability to God. He comments that in the absence of messengers sent by God, humans would have an excuse to abandon worship of God and obedience to him. He refers to the arguments of the Muʿtazila who had ar-

gued on the basis of such verses that God does not act capriciously[68] and that he does not burden human beings beyond what they can bear.[69]

God is indeed described as just in the Qurʾān (4:40), which is one of his ninety-nine "beautiful names" or epithets. The Qurʾān also states that God has prescribed mercy upon himself (Qurʾān 6:12; 54). Other essential attributes of God – his omniscience, his omnipotence; his generosity, etc. – are divulged in the Qurʾān. It is therefore through revelation that humans become aware of the Divine Being's attributes and which allows them to establish a knowing and loving relationship with him. The two most common names of God – *ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥīm* – emphasizing his mercy are mentioned in the Qurʾān 57 and 114 times respectively. The frequency of occurrence of these names in revelation conveys to the believer that God's mercy is limitless and envelops all those who sincerely attempt to do good but who inevitably fall short as fallible humans. "O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Do not despair of the mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is most forgiving and most Merciful," assures the Qurʾān (39:53).

As the bearer of God's message rooted in mercy and justice, Muḥammad himself is also described "as a mercy to all people" (*raḥmatan li-ʾl-ʿālamīn*) in Qurʾān 21:107. Aṭ-Ṭabarī in his commentary on Qurʾān 21:107 takes this description to be self-explanatory and does not comment on it further.[70] But aṭ-Ṭabarī indicates that the exegetes differed among themselves regarding the meaning of *li-ʾl-ʿālamīn* (in our translation "to all people") and therefore regarding the universality of the Qurʾānic revelation. Some of the exegetes had apparently questioned whether Muḥammad had been sent to both the believers and the unbelievers while others, like Ibn ʿAbbas, asserted that indeed it was so. ʿAbd ar-Rahmān b. Zayd however had maintained that *al-ʿālamūn* referred only to "those who believed in him [sc. the Prophet] and deemed his message true." Aṭ-Ṭabarī regards Ibn ʿAbbas' exegesis as more plausible and comments that the Prophet Muḥammad was a mercy to both the believers and the unbelievers. In the first instance, the believers were guided to faith and righteous action through the Prophet while in the second, the unbelievers, through his presence among them, were given a reprieve from the divine punishment that had befallen

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68 There is an implicit criticism here of some among the Ashʾarites who maintained that God can behave as He wishes.

69 Ibid., 4:268. Similar reasons are given by Az-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf an Ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmid at-tanzīl wa ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh at-taʾwīl,* ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwad (eds), Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʿUbaykān, 1998, 2:180.

70 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 9:100.

other nations before them.[71] In Ibn ʿAbbās' and Ibn Zayd's differing interpretations as recorded by aṭ-Ṭabarī, we see particularity vying with universality in defining the scope and effect of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad and the scope of the revelation vouchsafed to him. While Ibn Zayd would restrict accessibility to the divine message conveyed by Muḥammad to the salvific community of Muslims alone, Ibn ʿAbbās' interpretation universalizes access to the same message, whose language and content cut across self-consciously erected confessional boundaries and speak, as we might put it today, to a globalizing world.

Az-Zamakhsharī takes it to be self-evident that Muḥammad was sent as a mercy to all people, Muslim and non-Muslim, good and bad. In his brief commentary on Qurʾān 21:107, az-Zamakhsharī maintains that the Prophet came equally to those who followed him willingly and thereby achieved happiness and to those who opposed him and refused to follow him, thereby ruining themselves in the process. In other words, everyone potentially had equal access to Muḥammad or, conversely, the Prophet made himself available to all. The people around him derived benefit – or not – from his presence and his message, according to their individual choices and actions. To better illustrate what he means, az-Zamakhsharī uses the example of a gushing spring which God has caused to spring forth and which is accessible to all. Some people use the water from this spring to irrigate their lands and water their livestock and thus prosper. Others fail to use the spring to water their lands and face financial loss. Despite these different consequences, says az-Zamakhsharī , the spring *qua* spring represents a blessing from God and a mercy to both groups of people. Idle people (*al-kaslān*), he says, are a trial to themselves since they willfully deprive themselves of a beneficial thing. Muḥammad is a source of mercy even to the morally reprobate (*al-fujjār)*, he stresses, because their punishment is averted by his presence in their midst and he grants them protection from being destroyed.[72]

Ar-Rāzī comments extensively on how and why the Prophet Muḥammad constituted, as he phrases it, "a mercy in religion and in the world". In brief, ar-Rāzī comments that at the time of his prophetic mission, the people in general lived in ignorance and error, and even the People of the Book were in despair and divided among themselves. Muḥammad summoned the people to the truth, showed them the path of salvation, and promulgated laws which clearly distinguished between what is licit and illicit. Although prior nations were destroyed for refusing to obey their prophets, ar-Rāzī references another verse, Qurʾān 8:33, which

71 Ibid., 9:101.
72 Az-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 4:170.

states, "God would not punish them while you [i.e. the Prophet] are among them." Like his predecessors, ar-Rāzī therefore stresses that the Prophet's presence among the unbelievers had warded off divine retribution against them. Like aṭ-Ṭabarī, ar-Rāzī disagrees with Ibn Zayd that the Prophet was sent as a mercy only to the believers and affirms instead that his mercy extended to all. He cites a *ḥadīth* related by Abū Hurayra in which he [sc. Abū Hurayra] implores Muḥammad to inveigh against the polytheists, but the Prophet replies, "Indeed I was sent as a [source of] mercy and not as [a source of] affliction."[73]

In the discussion of all three exegetes above, mercy and compassion render Muḥammad's mission and legacy eminently pleasing and accessible to all and endows the revelation given to him with an enduring universality. God's imposition of mercy upon Himself and upon His Apostle is clearly articulated in the Qurʾānic revelation and invites humanity to find hope in this aspect of divine self-disclosure.

7 Revelation as a Message of Hope and Guidance to All Humanity

Revelation is described several times in the Qurʾān as a message (*risāla*) or messages (*risālāt)* from the universal God to all humanity conveyed by his various prophets through time. Although this message is fundamentally the same, it is also particularized by time and place. In Qurʾān 7:79, the prophet Ṣāliḥ affirms to his erring community "O my people, I have indeed conveyed to you the message of my Lord and offered you advice but you do not like advisors." Similarly, Noah tells his people, "I convey to you the messages of my Lord and advise you; and I know from God what you do not know (Qurʾān 7:62).

The Prophet Muḥammad is exhorted by the Qurʾān (72:23 – 24) to say to his community: "Indeed, there will never protect me from God anyone [if I should disobey], nor will I find in other than Him a refuge. I have for you but only messages from God, and His messages" (*risālāt*). The transmission of these messages is the primary aspect of Muḥammad's role as prophet, as it was of the prophets who preceded him, a role which the Qurʾān praises and affirms. "God praises those who convey the messages of God and fear Him and do not fear anyone but God. And sufficient is God as a reckoner" (Qurʾān 33:39).

In the context of this understanding of revelation as a message from God that is conveyed in verbal form to its recipient, the Qurʾān further refers to itself

73 Ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 8:193.

as "weighty speech" (73:5) and as "the word of God" (*kalām allāh*, Qurʾān 2:75; 9:6; 48:15), in addition to *tanzīl,* as mentioned earlier. The Qurʾān also refers to itself in several places as scripture or book – *kitāb* – which parallels previous revelations given to various apostles through time. Revelations given to Abraham and Moses are described as being preserved in scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*; cf. Qurʾān 87:19; 53:36–37). In all these revelations there is guidance for humanity, which the Qurʾān in turn confirms. Qurʾān 5:46 says:

> We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow in their footsteps, confirming what was before him, and We bestowed on him the Gospel in which there is guidance and light, confirming that which was before it in the Torah – a guidance and a reminder to those who are careful.

The Qurʾān in fact instructs the Prophet Muḥammad to declare to his listeners that Muslims must believe in the prior revelations vouchsafed to God's messengers who are equally righteous and blameless. The equality of God's messengers is a recurrent theme in the Qurʾān and in the Islamic tradition, even though a number of medieval Muslim theologians went on to articulate a doctrine of supersessionism vis-á-vis the Jewish and Christian scriptures, in explicit defiance of verses such as Qurʾān 3:84:

> Say: We believe in God and what is revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and what was entrusted to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered.

The Qurʾān further asserts that all the prophets submitted to a similar covenant with God and they proclaim the same essential message. The sectarian divisiveness among humans is a result of their faulty understanding over time of the divine eternal message that was faithfully conveyed by all of God's apostles. Thus Qurʾān 33:7–8 states:

> And when We exacted a covenant from the Prophets, and from you (O Muḥammad) and from Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus, son of Mary – We took from them a solemn covenant; that He may ask the loyal of their loyalty. And He has prepared a painful doom for the unfaithful.

And again, Qurʾān 42:13 states,

> He has ordained for you that religion which He commended to Noah, and that which We inspire in you (referring to Muḥammad), and that which We commended to Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying, "Establish the religion and do not be divided in it."

The prophets are therefore innocent of the theological wrangling that ensued among their followers and the Qurʾān affirms that there is no fundamental disjunction between the Judeo-Christian revelation and the Islamic one.

In formal doctrinal explanations, the different aspects of the Qurʾān as heavenly revelation and its liturgical role in communal and individual worship are emphasized. As the popular treatise on Islamic dogma titled *al-Fiqh al-Akbar* attributed to Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767/150) states, "The Qurʾān is the word of God Almighty (*kalām allāh taʿālā*), transcribed in written copies (*maṣāḥif*), preserved in hearts, recited on tongues, and revealed to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him."[74]

Revelation as God's speech and message is not however meant to be passively received by humans but rather to be engaged with spiritually and intellectually. The Qurʾān repeatedly calls on its hearers to use their reason in understanding its revelations. It challenges them to ponder it seriously and reflect on its internal consistency and the truth that it contains. "For had it come from any other source than God, they would have found in it much discrepancy" (Qurʾān 4:82). Moreover, "This is the book in which there is no doubt, [a source of] guidance to the God-fearing" (Qurʾān 2:2). Since the primary function of the Qurʾān is to guide humankind to God and the Good, its message must be understood, contemplated upon, and implemented in one's life.

To provide guidance for humanity, the Qurʾān contains detailed moral and legal precepts that demarcate what is permissible and what is impermissible for the faithful. It communicates its teachings through parables, similes and metaphors, and admonitions. It recounts stories of bygone nations and their prophets and the examples one may learn from their history. The Qurʾān announces divine promises to the righteous of the bliss of Paradise, and threats to the wrong-doers of punishment in hell. The Qurʾān furthermore establishes for the believing community specific religious obligations (*farāʾiḍ*) which include prayer, almsgiving, fasting during the month of Ramaḍān, undertaking the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to the Kaʿba in Mecca if one is financially and physically capable, and in general striving in the path of God (*al-jihād fī sabīl allāh*) to better oneself and the society around them.

One of the persistent messages contained within the Qurʾān is that good must eventually triumph over evil. Revelation serves the purpose of reiterating this message to humanity through time and thus keep hope alive in the final vindication of truth and goodness, especially in times of despair. The Qurʾān there-

74 Abū Ḥanīfa, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, 4; available online at: www.mailofislam.com/uploads/Al-Fiqh_Al-Akbar.pdf (last accessed Nov 4, 2019).

fore frequently refers to earlier prophets and their role in the construction of this salvational history centered on hope. As the well-known modern scholar of Islam Fazlur Rahman ably phrased it.

> It is because of this basic line of thought concerning the final victory of good over evil that the Qurʾān refers constantly to the vindication of Noah, who was saved from the flood; of Abraham, who was saved from fire; of Moses, who was saved from Pharaoh and his hordes; and of Jesus, who was saved from execution at the hands of the Jews (hence the rejection by the Qurʾān of the crucifixion story). Muḥammad must equally be vindicated; he will not only be saved but his Message will be victorious. Hence he must proclaim the Message loudly and without reservations – even though he is by temperament a reserved and withdrawn person and the Message is revolutionary: "Proclaim loudly what you are commanded and become indifferent to [the machinations of] those who assign partner to God" (15:94).[75]

The message vouchsafed through revelation must above all be made known and heard and acted upon by humanity. Despite the perilous circumstances in which believers are called upon to receive the divine message and implement it in their lives, the Qurʾān assures them that success (*al-falāḥ*) and deliverance (*an-najāḥ*) awaits them, if not in this world, then certainly in the hereafter.

8 Revelation as Reminder: *Fiṭra* and Intrinsic Human Dignity

In chapter 41, the 42nd verse refers to the Qurʾānic revelation as a "reminder" (*dhikr/dhikra/tadhkira*), which is another important aspect of the God-human relationship. This reminder is sent by God as a sign of his inexhaustible mercy for erring humanity, who are urged to mend their ways and restore their relationship with the Almighty so as to be guided on the straight path. "And is it not enough for them that We have sent down to you the Book Which is rehearsed to them? Verily, in it is mercy and a reminder to those who believe" (Qurʾān 29:51).

And again, "And indeed, it is a reminder (*tadhkira*) for the righteous." (Qurʾān 69:48); "Then do you wonder that there has come to you a reminder (*dhikr*) from your Lord through a man from among you, that he may warn you and that you may fear God so you might receive mercy?" (Qurʾān 7:63). In his commentary on Qurʾān 69:48, aṭ-Ṭabarī says that "a reminder" is a reference to the Qurʾān which provides counsel and admonition for the righteous, who

75 Rahman, Fazlur, *Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, Minneapolis: Biblioteca Islamica, 1989, 87.

avert God's punishment by carrying out his commands and refrain from disobeying Him.[76]

Revelation as a "reminder" may be fruitfully connected with the concept of *fiṭra* – which may be defined as a natural predisposition inspired in all human beings by God (as referenced above) that serves as an instinctive moral compass. This inborn nature predisposes humans towards belief in the one God and allows them to discern between good and evil. Qurʾān 30:30 states, "Observe religion in sincerity (*ḥanīfan*) which is the nature created by God upon which He created humankind (*faṭara an-nās*). There is no changing the creation of God. That is the right religion (*dīn*) but most people know not."

On account of this primordial disposition, humans are born with the need and desire to worship the one God. However, humans are often forgetful and as they advance through life, lose touch with their *fitra* and adopt blameworthy ways. Out of solicitude for humankind, God sends His prophets with revelation to remind human beings of their essential disposition and to exhort them to revert to their true nature. The Qurʾān stresses that the prophets and divine revelation only remind; humans have a choice in complying with this reminder: "Surely, this is a reminder (*tadhkira*); so whoever wills, let him make his way to his Lord." (Qurʾān 76:29). Failure to heed God's reminder however results in oppressing oneself for one cannot fully realize one's true potential as a human being. "Who is more of an oppressor [to one's self] than the one who is reminded by the verses of his Lord but turns away from them and forgets what his hands have sent on?" (Qurʾān 18:57)

Ar-Rāzī in his commentary on Qurʾān 76:29 says that Chapter 76 – with all that it contains of ordered symmetrical language and exquisite locutions, of exhortations and admonitions – serves as a reminder for those who reflect and provides insight to those who are perspicacious. So whoever wishes benefit for his soul in this world and in the hereafter will wend his way towards God, which means that he will seek to draw closer to Him.[77]

The universal significance of the Qurʾānic revelation finds quintessential expression in Qurʾān 38:87; in this verse the Qurʾān is described as "only a warning or reminder (*dhikr*) for all creation." In his very brief commentary on this verse, aṭ-Ṭabarī remarks that the Prophet was asked to assert before the Meccan polytheists that the Qurʾān was a reminder from God and that "all creation" referred

76 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12:224.
77 Ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 10:761.

to humans and the jinn, who by virtue of their faith could save themselves from perdition.[78]

In his even briefer commentary, az-Zamakhsharī simply says that the verse refers to the Qurʾān as a reminder from God.[79]

Ar-Rāzī understands *dhikr* in relation to the Qurʾān as that which prompts "every sound mind and upright disposition" to attest to the truth and majesty of the divine law (*ash-sharīʿa*) and avoid what is false and corrupt.[80] This verse has a variant in Qurʾān 6:90 where the Qurʾān is described as "a reminder to all creation", which ar-Rāzī understands to be an affirmation that Muḥammad was "sent to all the people of the world," and not to any specific group of people to the exception of another.[81]

Ultimately, the Qurʾān explains, our fundamental humanness fashioned by a common Creator is what endows us with intrinsic dignity and makes us the equal of one another. This is unambiguously proclaimed in Qurʾān: "We have honored (all) the children of Adam with innate dignity (*karāma*); and provided them with transportation on both land and sea; and given them sustenance from the good and pure things in life; and favored them far above most of those We have created."

This distinctive Islamic concept of human dignity is furthermore illustrated in Qurʾān 32:9 which states: "[God] fashioned [the human being] in due proportion, and breathed into him something of His spirit (*wa nafakha fīhī min rūḥih*). Then He endowed you with [the faculties of] hearing and sight and feeling [and understanding]: but little thanks do you give!"

From this Qurʾānic perspective, living in this world with dignity for all – regardless of whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim, male or female, adult or child, rich or poor – should be a fundamental objective of the rightly-ordered society. Every human being has exactly the same intrinsic worth since each carries the divine breath within them. Revelation is a reminder of this fundamental truth and prods the human conscience into acknowledging and implementing the rights that accrue to every individual as a consequence of this divinely-mandated equality.

78 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 10:608.
79 Az-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 5:285.
80 Ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 9:416–17.
81 Ibid., 5:58.

9 Revelation as Mediation of the Tension between Inclusivism and Exclusivism

The Qurʾān (3:84) directs Muslims to say:

> We have believed in God and in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims [submitting] to Him.

This verse appears to stand in tension with the very next verse which declares, "And whoever desires a religion other than Islam – never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers."

The well-known scholar of Islam Abdulaziz Sachedina addresses this tension by pointing to the contested interpretation of "islam" in Qurʾān 3:85 focused on the following question – does it refer to specifically the historical religion associated with the Prophet Muḥammad or does it refer in general to the "submission/surrender" of all believers to the one God, which is the word's basic meaning? Sachedina subscribes to the latter interpretation, which, he points out, accords better with how the Qurʾān itself deploys this term in a number of places. [82]

In corroboration of this inclusivist position, one may look at Qurʾān 3:67 which states,

> Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was one inclining toward truth, a Muslim [a person who submits to God]. He was not one of the polytheists." Another verse, Qurʾān 2:133 underscores the broader, generic meaning of *islam:* "When death approached Jacob, he said to his sons, 'Who will (you) worship after I am gone?' They answered, 'We will worship your God, the God of our forefathers, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, the One God. We will surrender ourselves unto Him (*muslimūn*).'

These and other similar verses clearly establish that *islām*/*muslim* is used in the Qurʾān frequently in the broadest sense of righteous believers who have surrendered to God, which impacts our understanding of Qurʾān 3:85. Most exegetes in the pre-modern period however understood this verse to have abrogated or superseded other verses that speak highly of righteous Jews and Christians and which extend to them the same salvific promise extended to Muslims (cf.

82 Sachedina, Abdulaziz, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 39, 44, and passim.

Qurʾān 2:62; 5:69). Abrogation (*naskh*) in fact became the preferred hermeneutical tool of exclusivist exegetes who wished to restrict salvation to Muslims alone and read such views back into scripture. The rich exegetical literature on the Qurʾān (*tafsīr*) sometimes indicates to us that inclusivist views vied with more exclusivist ones in Islam's formative period as Muslims struggled to articulate a communal identity in the multi-religious environment that they found themselves in. The process of identity formation that consequently ensued can be recuperated to some extent by undertaking a diachronic survey of the exegeses of two key Qurʾānic verses that describe a righteous faction among the People of the Book in highly positive terms.

The first of these verses is Qurʾān 5:66 which states:

> If they [sc. The People of the Book] had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and from below. Some of them constitute a balanced community (*umma muqtaṣida*), but many of them are prone to wrong-doing.

The literal meaning of the Qurʾānic term *umma muqtaṣida* used to describe a righteous contingent from among the People of the Book is "a balanced" or "moderate community/nation." In his commentary on this term, the eighth century exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767/150) says it refers to "a group (*ʿasaba*) of believers from among the people of the Torah and the Gospel who are just (*ʿadila*) in their speech." Among this group of Jews were ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām (d. ca. 663/43) and his companions while the Christians "who had adhered to the religion of Jesus, the son of Mary (peace and blessings be upon him)" were comprised of thirty two men. Muqātil thus clearly understands *umma muqtaṣida* to refer to specific Jews and Christians who responded positively to the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad and embraced Islam.[83]

In the Qurʾān commentary attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās known as the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, *umma muqtaṣida* is glossed as referring to a just and upright group from among the People of the Book. This group included ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām and his companions; Buḥayra the monk and his companions; the Negus, the king of Abyssinia; and Salmān al-Fārisī and his companions.[84] In comparison with the list of "moderate Jews and Christians" provided by Muqātil, this list includes Buḥayra and the Negus, who are not known to have converted to Islam (although some have speculated that the Negus had secretly accepted Islam). In this possibly quite early exegesis (if its attribution to Ibn ʿAbbās is accepted), *umma*

83 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 1:491.
84 *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 128.

muqtaṣida includes Christians who are popularly known to have been exceptionally well disposed towards Islam, some of whom had actively aided Muslims in their time of dire need, as the Negus did, and who recognized their scriptural kinship to Muslims without converting, like Buḥayra.

Aṭ-Ṭabarī understands *umma muqtaṣida* to refer to those People of the Book who are "moderate in their speech regarding Jesus, son of Mary, speaking the truth about him that he is the Messenger of God and His word which He cast into Mary and a spirit from Him," and not exceeding the bounds by saying that he was the son of God nor being remiss in saying that he lacked divine guidance. The rest of the Jews and Christians, and they are in the majority, err in not believing in the prophetic mission of Muḥammad and in claiming that the Messiah was the son of God in the case of Christians and in rejecting both Jesus and Muḥammad in the case of Jews."[85]

As he is wont to do, aṭ-Ṭabarī provides attestations for these exegetical understandings. Thus, according to one chain of transmission, the late first/seventh century exegete Mujāhid is quoted as glossing *umma muqtaṣida* as "those who had submitted (*muslima*) from among the People of the Book." Here submission however does not mean specifically accepting Islam as one's religion but rather submitting to God.[86]

A Companion report (that is, a report going back to an associate of Muḥammad only, not to the Prophet himself) from Qatāda explains "a moderate community" as referring to those from among the People of the Book who "abide by His book and His command," while the rest, the majority, who do not are criticized in the Qurʾān for their wrong-doing. A very early exegete as-Suddī (d. 745/128) is quoted by aṭ-Ṭabarī as equating "a moderate community" with "a believing (*muʾmina*) community." Ibn Zayd, another early authority, says that *umma muqtaṣida* referred to people who were known for their obedience to God (*ahl ṭaʿāt allāh*), "and these are the People of the Book."[87] Finally, ar-Rabīʿ b. Anas is cited as saying that *umma muqtaṣida* referred broadly to "those who are neither harsh nor excessive in their religion."[88] These specific glosses going back to early authorities, as recorded by aṭ-Ṭabarī, recognize and praise moderation among observant Jews and Christians who are true to their own scripture and laws and who are thus obedient to God.

85 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4:645–646.
86 Ibid., 4:646.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.