

Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān

Revelation and Inspiration

The communication of God's knowledge (see **KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING**) and will (see **POWER AND IMPOTENCE**), **warning** (q.v.) and promise to humanity. The English word "revelation" covers a range of qurʾānic terms, principal among them *wahy*, "communication" and *tanzil*, "sending down," with their cognate verbal forms. In the Qurʾān revelation is always mediated, rather than being direct: first, in the sense that it consists in the transmission of a message rather than the "unveiling" of God himself implied by the English word **q** with its Christian origins and, secondly, because even that message is considered to have been delivered by an intermediary, generally identified as **Gabriel** (q.v.; *jibrīl*). The concept of revelation is central to the nature of the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān itself, however, recognizes the phenomenon as extending beyond prophecy (see **PROPHETS AND PROPHETHOOD**) and scripture (see **BOOK**).

Revelation before and beyond scripture

One of the Qurʾān's most insistent claims is that God is constantly offering "signs" (q.v.; *āya*, pl. *āyāt*) that manifest all we need to know. The *āyāt* that constitute God's revelation exist in nature (see **NATURE AS SIGNS**) and in **time** (q.v.) before they come to the people as **verses** (q.v.; also *āyāt*) of scripture. Indeed, the role of the prophetic scriptures is to call people back to the acknowledgment of a **truth** (q.v.) already expressed in the signs of nature and in the history of God's dealings with humanity (see **HISTORY AND THE QURʾĀN**). It could be said that there is no essential difference between the verses and the natural or historical signs: all are there to be comprehended by anyone who has the intelligence (q.v.; *ʿaql*) to reflect on them, to acknowledge their truth (*taṣdīq*) and to respond with faithful submission (*īmān, islām*; see **FAITH; BELIEF AND UNBELIEF; ISLAM**). Many such passages in the Qurʾān cite natural phenomena as symbols pointing to the creator (see **CREATION; AGRICULTURE AND VEGETATION**). Among the more important are Q 2:164; 3:190-1; 6:95-9; 10:5-7; 13:2-4; 16:10-6, 78-81; 23:21-2; 26:7-8; 27:86, 93; 29:44; 30:20-8, 46; 32:27; 34:9; 36:33-47, 39:21; 41:37, 39, 53; 42:29-34; 45:1-6, 12-13; 50:6-11; 51:20.

Historical events, too, are among the "signs" of God. The fate of nations that have passed away (*umam qad khalat*, Q 7:38; 46:18; cf. 13:30; 41:25; see **GEOGRAPHY ; q PUNISHMENT STORIES; GENERATIONS**) is a warning to people that they should take seriously the message of the Prophet (Q 12:109; 14:13; 23:23-30; 31:31-2; 32:26; 36:13-31; 46:27). In these cases the Qurʾān is not revealing something not already known to everybody; rather, it is pointing to these facts of history as revealing the ways of God and the reality of God's threatened judgment (see **LAST JUDGMENT; JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE**). On other occasions the revelation consists in God's communicating "tidings of the unseen" (*anbāʾ al-ghayb*, Q 3:44; 11:49; 12:102; see **HIDDEN AND THE HIDDEN**), details of prophetic history that neither Muḥammad nor his people would otherwise have known.

Scriptural revelation prior to the Qurʾān

In the Qurʾān it is axiomatic that the present revelation contains fundamentally the same message as that given to earlier messengers (see **MESSANGER**). The believers are expected to accept the revelations given before Muḥammad (Q 2:4, 136; 4:60, 162) since God communicated with those messengers as he has done with Muḥammad: "We revealed to you (*awḥaynā ilayka*) as we revealed to **Noah** (q.v.) and the **prophets** after him, and as we revealed to **Abraham** (q.v.) and **Ishmael** (q.v.) and **Isaac** (q.v.) and **Jacob** (q.v.) and the tribes (see **CHILDREN OF ISRAEL**), and **Jesus** (q.v.) and **Job** (q.v.) and **Jonah** (q.v.) and **Aaron** (q.v.) and **Solomon** (q.v.), and as we granted **David** (q.v.) the **Psalms**" (q.v.; Q 4:163); "Say, we believe in God and what has been sent down to us and in what was sent down to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and in what **Moses** (q.v.) and Jesus were given, and in what the prophets were given by their **lord** (q.v.) — we make no distinction between any of them — and to him do we submit" (Q 2:136). The term that binds together these diverse manifestations of revelation is *kitāb* (pl. *kutub*), "scripture": **q** "O you who believe, believe in God and his messenger and the *kitāb* that he has sent down to his messenger, and the *kitāb* that he sent down before. Whoever disbelieves in God and his angels (see **ANGEL**) and his *kutub* and his messengers and the last day has already gone far **astray**" (q.v.; Q 4:136; see also **ERROR**).

The Qurʾān sees itself as confirming (*muṣaddiq*) the previous revelations (Q 2:41, 89, 91, 97, 101; 3:3, 39, 81; 4:47; 5:48; 6:92; 10:37; 12:111; 35:31; 46:12, 30) in the same way as Jesus came to confirm the **Torah** (q.v.; Q 3:50; 5:46; 61:6). This raises a difficulty for the notion of verbal inspiration since the actual text of the Qurʾān is not identical to those of the other extant scriptures (see also **GOSPEL; SCRIPTURE AND THE QURʾĀN**).

Wahy

The term *wahy* occurs in Arabic before the rise of Islam (see **PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA AND THE QURʾĀN**). In pre-Islamic poetry (see **POETRY AND POETS**) the word is occasionally used to refer to writing or scriptures (usually with the connotation of the indistinctness of age and foreignness) but more often to describe the message that can be discerned from the traces of an abandoned campsite or the ruins of a habitation (for example, the beginning of Labīd's *Muʾallaqa: kamā ḍamina l-wahyu silāmuḥā*, "as though its rocks contained the message"). Still other uses by the same poets show that the term *wahy* is equally applicable to communication by sound or gesture. For example, one of the odes of ʿAlqama uses the verbal form *yūḥī* to describe the "speech" of a male ostrich to his nestlings: "He communicates (*yūḥī*) with them in squeaking and clacking sounds, just as the Greeks in their castles speak to each other in an incomprehensible language" (Ahlwardt, *Divans*, 112, v 26). In the poems of the Hudhayl tribe the noun *wahy q* refers to thunder, and the cognate verb *awḥā* is used for the screeching of an eagle (Lewin, *Vocabulary*, 465; for more examples see Izutsu, *God*, 159-60).

Some western scholars have often wanted to see in the term *wahy* a connection with writing (for example Goldziher, *MS*, ii, 7 and Nöldeke, *GQ*, ii, 1; see **ORALITY AND WRITING IN ARABIA**). The evidence, however, is far from convincing. Indeed, as will be seen, Muslim tradition has overwhelmingly described the phenomenon of revelation as auditory (even though sometimes accompanied by visions, for example, in the Qurʾān itself: Q 53:4-18; see **ORALITY; VISIONS**) and very often lacking verbal clarity. Furthermore, the poets' usage of *wahy* emphasized indistinctness rather than clarity appropriate to a text that declares itself to be in the clear language of the **Arabs** (q.v.; *lisān ʿarab mubīn*, Q 16:103; 26:195; see also **ARABIC LANGUAGE**).

In the Qurʾān itself, while *wahy* is clearly marked as a religious term, three instances of its use remind us that it has a non-religious basis and is not solely a divine activity: **Zechariah** (q.v.) after being struck dumb gestured (*awḥā*) to his companions that they should give **praise** (q.v.) to God (Q 19:11; see also Q 3:41, where it is said that Zechariah was only able to communicate *ramzan*, "using signs"); and twice the same verb is used to describe the communication that takes place among the demons (*shayāṭīn*, Q 6:112, 121; see **DEVIL; JINN**). When the verb is used of divine activity, it most often refers to God's communication with his messengers. Others with whom God communicates are Jesus' disciples (Q 5:111; see **APOSTLE**), the angels (Q 8:12), Moses' mother (Q 20:38; 28:7) Isaac and Jacob (Q 21:72-3) and Noah (Q 23:27). This verb is also used for God's communication with the bee (Q 16:68), the heavens (Q 41:12; see **HEAVEN AND SKY; ANIMAL LIFE**) and the **earth** (q.v.; Q 99:5).

q It should be noted that *wahy*, even when addressed to prophets and messengers, is not by any means confined to the revelation of a scriptural text. Out of the seventy-one occurrences of *awḥā*, only three times each are *kitāb* and *qurʾān* the direct object (or the subject of a passive form). The verb *awḥā* is often used without a direct object: a process of communication takes place but what is communicated is left unstated. At the same time, however, the communication is not devoid of content. In many cases the end result is a concrete instruction to be followed, for example, in God's direction of the prophetic career of Moses (Q 7:117, 160; 10:87; 20:48; 20:77; 26:52, 63; see **COMMANDMENTS; BOUNDARIES AND PRECEPTS**). On other occasions it is doctrinal content (see **CREED; THEOLOGY AND THE QURʾĀN**): "Say, 'I am only human like you (see **IMPECCABILITY**). It is revealed (*yūḥā*) to me that your God is only one God. And whoever there may be who looks forward to the encounter with his lord, let him do good work (see **GOOD DEEDS**) and associate no one else with his **lord in worship**" (q.v.; Q 18:110; see **POLYTHEISM AND ATHEISM; IDOLATRY AND IDOLATERS**).

Izutsu (*God*, 180) and Jeffery (Qurʾān, 190-2) both suggest a development of the idea of *wahy* in the Qurʾān, from an earlier usage suggesting a general inspiration to say or do something, towards a more technical usage where the term applies very specifically to the verbatim revelation of scripture. There may be some truth to this, but it must also be noted that some of the non-scriptural uses occur in what are generally agreed to be late Medinan sūras (for example Q 5:111; 8:12; see **CHRONOLOGY AND THE QURʾĀN**).

In the interpretation of *wahy*, Muslim tradition has guarded the distance between the divine and the human. There are, however, some important indications in the text **q** of a more direct communication. In Q 4:164 it is emphatically stated that God spoke to Moses directly (*wa-kallama llāhu Mūsā taklīmān*), though some commentators read the accusative *Allāha*, indicating rather that Moses spoke to God directly. Without mentioning the case of Moses, Q 42:51 outlines three exceptions to the general rule that God does not address people: "It is not granted to any mortal that God should address him (*yukallimahu*) except by *wahy*, or from behind a **veil** (q.v.), or that he send a messenger who reveals (*yūḥī*) with his permission what he wills. Surely he is exalted, wise." There seems a clear enough distinction between the first exception and the third: in one case the connection is more direct; in the other, God uses an intermediary. In both cases, however, there is revelatory communication. The verse indicates that the Qurʾān envisages a process of revelation that does not involve an angelic go-between. Perhaps the distinction between direct address (*taklīm*) and the kind of communication that took place with the prophets may be found in pre-Islamic usage of the type already alluded to. A common thread of mysteriousness and indecipherability runs through those uses of *wahy* and *awḥā*. Often a sense of distance, absence and antiquity are implied. Even when the communication is immediate, however, without an angelic intermediary, it is still incomprehensible to the third-person observer. Recall the poet ʿAlqama's clacking ostrich and incomprehensible Greeks.

Wahy, then, does not seem to be the simple and unambiguous direct address that Wansbrough takes it to be (QS, 34-6), though he is surely right to insist on a measure of demystification (see **POST-ENLIGHTENMENT ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE QURʾĀN**). Nor does *wahy* have any necessary connection with written communication as many others have suggested. It indicates **q** a kind of communication that appears impenetrable and perhaps exotic to a third person observing it, yet remains full of meaning for the one receiving it. Given the range of its use, it seems possible, perhaps even preferable, to translate *wahy* simply as "communication," understanding that it normally refers to divine communication.

The experience of revelation: For the Prophet

The Qurʾān itself tells us little, if anything, about the experience of revelation. The exegetical and historical traditions, on the other hand, have dwelt on the subject in detail,

expanding on various suggestive verses of the Qurʾān to piece together a coherent account (see **SĪRA AND THE QURʾĀN**). The time leading up to the initial experience of revelation for Muḥammad was, according to Muslim tradition, characterized by vivid dreams and portents (Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 151; Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, i, 1143-6; id., *History*, vi, 63-7). When the revelation actually begins, one finds a certain vagueness in the tradition about whether the Prophet initially encounters God (as seems to be suggested by q 53:1-18; see also Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 150; trans. Ibn Ishāq-Guillaume, 104-5; Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, i, 1147; trans. Watt/McDonald, *History*, vi, 67-8, where it is said *al-ḥaqq*, one of the names of God, came to him; see **GOD AND HIS ATTRIBUTES**) or whether his dealings with the divine are always through the medium of Gabriel. The consensus of the tradition has it that the first words of the Qurʾān to be revealed were the beginnings of sūra 96, when Gabriel came bringing a cloth on which was embroidered the text to be recited. Three times the messenger tells Muḥammad to recite and he answers that he is unable, until finally Gabriel teaches him what to recite, and the words remain with him.

The encounter was physically violent and terrifying to Muḥammad. His reaction of **Q** hiding in fear then gave rise to his being addressed by the revelatory voice in q 74:1 f. (or perhaps q 73:1 f.). According to some versions, Gabriel first identifies himself and announces Muḥammad's role as messenger before beginning the recitation. In others, it is not until later that the origin and meaning of this terrifying experience is made clear (Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, i, 1147-50; trans. Watt/McDonald, *History*, vi, 67-72). Commentators distinguish three stages in the life of Muḥammad: *nubuwwa*, *risāla* and *wahy* — being a prophet, receiving the commission as a messenger and beginning to receive the revelation he is to pass on. In almost all these accounts there is mention of the Prophet's considering or even attempting **suicide** (q.v.), either because he thinks he has become a poet or a madman (see **INSANITY**), or because after the initial encounters the revelations are discontinued (the so-called *fatra*) and he is tempted to think God has rejected him.

The continuing revelations are also depicted in the tradition as often being accompanied by physical effects: a loud ringing sound as of a bell or chain, sweating, pain, fainting, lethargy or trance, turning pale, turning red, becoming physically heavier — perhaps the result of a too literal reading of *qawlan thaqīlan*, “a weighty word,” in q 73:5 (for a listing of traditions referring to these phenomena, see Wensinck/Rippin, *Wahy*, 55). It is said in some traditions that the **shekhinah** (q.v.; **sakīna**) descends upon him in these moments (Fahd, Kāhin, 889).

The Qurʾān itself refers to *wahy* as sometimes being accompanied by visions. The experience is portrayed as a kind of teaching:

It is nothing other than a revelation (*wahy*)

that is revealed (*yūḥā*)

One of mighty powers has taught him

Q one who is vigorous; and he grew clear to view

when he was on the highest horizon

(q 53:4-7; see also q 81:23-4).

According to al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), one of the differences between the inspiration (*ilhām*) brought by an angel to a mystic (see **SAINT**; **ṢUFISM AND THE QURʾĀN**) and the revelation brought to a prophet is that the prophet actually sees the angel (van Ess, *TC*, iv, 621). Al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870; *Ṣaḥīḥ*, iii, 391-2, *Kitāb Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, bāb 1), however, records a tradition to the effect that the angel was also visible on one occasion to Umm Salama, even if Gabriel was not visible to **Khadīja** (q.v.; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 154; see also **WIVES OF THE PROPHET**).

The experience of revelation: For the people

Apart from the physical effects listed above that the people observed when the Prophet received revelation, there are three important elements to be noted about the people's experience of revelation.

In the first place, the revelation is responsive to the situation in which people find themselves. It does not present itself as a prefabricated text related only in the most general way to the present moment. It is experienced as a living voice, ever on the point of intervening in order to resolve disputes, to clarify issues, to call to faith and to command action. The recurrent pattern “They say x; Say to them y” represents this interactive aspect of the revelation (see for example q 3:119, 154; 56:47-9; 64:7; 67:25-6). The position of the interlocutors is stated (“they say...”), followed by the response God wishes the Prophet to deliver (often preceded by the command *qul*, “Say!...”). Some Companion ḥadīth (see **COMPANIONS OF THE PROPHET**; **HADĪTH AND THE QURʾĀN**) indicate that it was not uncommon for a Qurʾānic verse to be revealed in the middle of a dispute **Q** among them or in the Prophet's family (see, for example, Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 735-6; see **FAMILY OF THE PROPHET**; **PEOPLE OF THE HOUSE**).

The second aspect of the hearers' experience is that the words are authoritative. The **authority** (q.v.) of the Prophet rests on the authority of the word he speaks (see **SPEECH**). Although there are, in the prophetic biography (*sīra*), accounts of **miracles** (q.v.) performed by Muḥammad, the Muslim community has had an ambivalent attitude toward them. They are often seen as either unfounded reports or, if true, extraneous to the essence of his prophecy. The encounter with the revelation elicits faith not because the authority of the Prophet has already been established by some other means, but because of the power of the word itself. The attesting miracle of the Prophet is understood to be nothing other than the Qurʾān (see **INIMITABILITY**; **NAMES OF THE QURʾĀN**).

One facet of the word's power, and the third important aspect of the hearers' experience, was its aesthetic force, its sheer beauty. The inimitability (*ijāz*) of the Qurʾān has not only an important apologetic role in the Islamic tradition but it signals, as Navid Kermani (Revelation, 223-4; cf. id., *Gott ist schön*) has pointed out, an essential aspect of the Muslim experience of revelation, in the beginning and even now. The sensual nature of this aesthetic dimension is often undervalued because of the more intellectual approach taken to it in apologetics (see **RHETORIC AND THE QURʾĀN**; **FORM AND STRUCTURE OF THE QURʾĀN**; **LITERARY STRUCTURES OF THE QURʾĀN**; **NARRATIVES**). It remains, however, an ambiguous element. The Qurʾān's repeated insistence (e.g. q 15:6-7; 21:5; 26:224; 36:69; 37:36; 44:14; 52:29, 30; 68:2, 51; 69:41, 42; 81:22) that the Prophet is neither a possessed poet nor a diviner (see **DIVINATION**; **FORETELLING**; **SOOTH-Q SAYERS**) — as well as the *Sīra*'s reference to his considering suicide because he thought he might have become such — indicates that the impression made on the hearers was plausibly comparable to that made by a poet or soothsayer possessed by a spirit.

Yet it is primarily the source of the words, and only to a much lesser extent their literary style (see **LANGUAGE AND STYLE OF THE QURʾĀN**), that makes the difference between the poet, the soothsayer and the prophet. All are, in a certain sense, visionaries, conveying knowledge of the unseen world (*al-ghayb*). Indeed, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 780/1379) posits a continuum in the preparedness of human beings to receive heavenly perceptions; the prophets are merely at the highest grade in this respect, but soothsayers, too, receive some genuine though incomplete spiritual perception (Ibn Khaldūn-Rosenthal, i, 207-8). Yet the source for the soothsayer is the *shayṭān* or the jinn, while the source for the prophet's knowledge is God. The poets and those who dismiss the Qurʾān as being no more than poetry, soothsaying or invention (see **LIE**) are challenged repeatedly (q 2:23; 10:38; 11:13; 17:88; 52:34) to bring something equal to it (see **PROVOCATION**). The challenge is predominantly interpreted by the tradition in aesthetic terms: there can be no text more eloquent and more beautiful than the Qurʾān (see **LITERATURE AND THE QURʾĀN**).

The process of revelation: tanzīl

The process of revelation is most commonly characterized by the spatial metaphor of “coming down, sending down” — derivatives of the verbal root *n-z-l*. The causative verb forms *nazzala* (sixty-three finite verbal occurrences, fifteen uses of the *maṣdar*, and two of the participle) and *anzala* (188 finite verbal occurrences, no uses of the *maṣdar*, and **Q** seven of the participle) are generally considered to be similar in meaning, “to send down.” Although by far the majority of uses of verbs from the root *n-z-l* deal with revelation, there are other objects as well: e.g. mountains (q 24:43), various kinds of rain (q 30:49; 31:34; 42:28), manna and quails (q 2:57; 7:160; 20:80), armies (q 9:26), and *al-furqān* (q 2:185; 3:4; 25:1; see **PROOF**; **CRITERION**) the meaning of which seems to bear elements of **salvation** (q.v.) as well as revelation.

In one sense, the notion of sending down itself could be said to be theologically neutral since it is merely spatial. This spatiality implies, however, the theological premise of a two-tiered universe in which the initiative is always in the upper (divine, celestial) tier. Furthermore, the verbal noun *tanzīl* standing by itself (e.g. q 36:5; 41:2, 42; 56:80; 69:43) is only used to refer to revelation. The activity of sending down is exclusively divine. Humans or angels may bring (*atā bi-*) or recount (*qaṣṣa*) the word of God but only God can send it down.

Although the direction of communication is always downward, tradition has also sought in its development of the story of Muḥammad's ascent to heaven (see **ASCENSION**) to establish a special prophetic access in the opposite direction. In addition, the first revelations are portrayed as taking place in a cave on Mount Ḥirāʾ to which the Prophet had ascended — in Islamic tradition, no less than in the Jewish and Christian traditions (see **Jews AND JUDAISM**; **CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY**), the mountaintop enjoys a privileged proximity to heaven.

The mode of sending down scripture is made clear repeatedly. It is oral, in the form of a recitation (*qurʾānan*); the idea of sending something down in writing is rejected as unlikely to prove convincing (q 6:7; 4:153). What is sent down is in the vernacular (*ʿarabī*, q 12:2; 16:103; 20:113; **Q** 39:28; 41:3, 44; 42:7; 43:3; see **DIALECTS**), rather than in a foreign or sacral language (*aʿjamī*, q 16:103; 41:44; but see **FOREIGN VOCABULARY**). God never sends a messenger except to speak in the language of the people he is addressing (q 14:4). The sending down comes gradually (*muḥarrarān*, q 17:106) or, as the commentators say, *munajjaman*, or *najjuman* (Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, i, 116-9; *nawʾ* 16, *Fi kayfiyyat inzālīhi, masʾala* 1); it comes in response to situations (q 25:33), rather than as a single, completed pronouncement (*jumlatan wāḥi-datan*, q 25:32).

The difficulty presented by the fact that the Qurʾān was not revealed all at once in an already fixed form is answered in the tradition by patching together, in varying ways, isolated parts of the text in order to outline a coherent schema that could reconcile a preexistent canon with what was clearly an *ad rem* mode of revelation (see **COLLECTION OF THE QURʾĀN**; **CODICES OF THE QURʾĀN**). The Qurʾān is presented as already complete in the realm of eternity; the text is preserved on a heavenly tablet (q 85:22; see **HEAVENLY BOOK**; **PRESERVED TABLET**), from which it is sent down whole to “noble scribes” (*saḥāba kirām*, q 80:15-6) or to the “abode of glory” (*bayt al-izza*, an idea attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās by, among others, Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, i, 116-9; *nawʾ* 16, *masʾala* 1) in the lowest heaven, then transmitted to Gabriel, who in turn parcels it out to Muḥammad according to the situation in which he finds himself (see **OCCASIONS OF REVELATION**).

The Islamic tradition, in developing its ever more elaborate “topology” of revelation, is certainly careful to maintain the distance between God and humanity (see **ANTHROPOMORPHISM**). Nevertheless, even if the divine essence remains inaccessible, a genuine unveiling of God's knowledge and manifestation of God's will does take place.

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The “occasions” of revelation

The apparently one-directional nature of *tanzīl* is qualified in the exegetical tradition by the notion that each part of the Qurʾān was revealed in a particular context in response to a particular situation. This particularity and contextuality is evident in many parts of the text itself. The term used is *sabab* (pl. *asbāb*), which carries an idea of causality that is somewhat veiled by the usual translation “occasion.” Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505; *Itqān*, i, 82-98: *nawʿ 9, Maʿrifat sabab al-nuzūl*) quotes Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328): “Knowing the reason for the sending down helps in the understanding of the verse. For knowledge of the cause (*sabab*) yields knowledge of the effect (*musabbab*).”

Because they offer a coherent historical context for individual verses or pericopes and because, taken together, they create a narrative structure for the Qurʾān, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* are among the principal traditional tools of interpretation (see **TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES OF QURʾĀNIC STUDY**). The importance of the *asbāb* for exegesis is the recognition of the responsive nature of the revelation that we have already observed. The commentators can, of course, maintain that it is not the verse itself that is occasioned or caused but rather the sending down of that verse, which itself remains preexistent (see **ETERNITY; CREATEDNESS OF THE QURʾĀN**). Even so, they are still implicitly recognizing that the process of revelation is a divine response elicited by human word and action.

The importance of this dynamic aspect of qurʾānic revelation is not to be underestimated. It is an essential counterbalance to an approach that privileges the idea of an impassive, static pronouncement fixed from all eternity. The God who speaks in the Qurʾān is also described many times as *baṣīr*, *samīʿ* and *ʿalīm* — one who sees and ¶ hears and therefore knows the present situation he is addressing (see **SEEING AND HEARING**).

The role of Gabriel

The Muslim tradition has tended to emphasize those parts of the Qurʾān that suggest that revelation is mediated through Gabriel. The Qurʾān itself does not call Gabriel an angel, though in the tradition there seems to be a conflation of God's **spirit** (q.v.), the angels and Gabriel. It is explicitly stated in q 2:97 that it is Gabriel (Jibrīl) who, by God's leave, brings the revelation down upon Muḥammad's **heart** (q.v.). In an earlier Meccan sūra (q 53:1-18), however, the most straightforward reading indicates a vision of God (see **FACE OF GOD**). Muḥammad is described in q 53:10 as the slave (*ʿabd*; see **SERVANT**) of the one he sees — a word that could hardly be applied to his relationship with Gabriel: “He revealed to his slave what he revealed.”

The biographical tradition, too, shifts between involving Gabriel and speaking as though the revelation were direct. We might deduce from this that the angel plays what we could call the role of a theological safeguard. If the Prophet has dealings only with Gabriel and not with God directly, the absolute transcendence and immateriality of God is safeguarded. Once the point is made, and the theological caveat entered, however, there is little real need to concentrate further on the angel. One finds a similar phenomenon with the role of God's messengers in the Hebrew Bible, for example in the accounts of Moses and the burning bush (*Exod* 3:2-4:17); of Hagar and Ishmael (*Gen* 16:7-14; 21:17-9); of Abraham and his guests (*Gen* 18-19); of Abraham's binding of Isaac (*Gen* 22:11-2); of Jacob (*Gen* 31:11-3; 32:24-30); and of Balaam (*Num* 22-4).

Yet, even though the angel can be understood as in some way bridging the ¶ ontological gap between the divine and the human, as Ibn Khaldūn pointed out, there is still a gap between the angelic and the human. The prophet must leave his own state and enter the state of the angels, the highest level of spiritual existence (Ibn Khaldūn-Rosenthal, i, 208). This explains the difficulty prophets experience in the moment of revelation (*ibid.*, i, 201). Ibn Khaldūn's analysis of the phenomenon of prophetic perception reflects the ambiguity of the angelic role. He leaves unresolved the issue of whether angelic agency is necessary to prophecy or whether, when prophets enter the angelic realm, they are just as able as the angels to understand the speech of God. He speaks of it as the realm of direct perception (*ibid.*, ii, 423-4).

Al-Samarqandī (d. 375/985) is reported as saying that there are three opinions about the role of Gabriel in the revelation of the Qurʾān: (1) that he brought both word and meaning (*al-laḫẓ wa-l-maʿnā*), having memorized the wording from the **Preserved Tablet** (q.v.; q 85:22); (2) that Gabriel brought the meanings (*maʿānī*) and the Prophet expressed (*abbara*) them in Arabic; (3) that it was Gabriel who expressed the message in Arabic — that is how it is recited in heaven — then later brought it in that form to the Prophet (Zarkashī, *Burhān*, i, 228-32: *nawʿ 12, Fī kayfiyyat inzālīhi*). Some authors would distinguish the second form as being characteristic of the revelation of the **sunna** (q.v.) rather than the Qurʾān, since the sunna is sometimes thought of as revealed. Whether or not that is accepted, the role of Gabriel has some considerable bearing on the question of verbal inspiration.

Verbal inspiration

The verbal inspiration of the Qurʾān is accepted as virtually axiomatic by the greater part of the Islamic tradition, though the doctrine is recognized even ¶ within that tradition as not being without its difficulties. The Qurʾān itself offers no simple answer to the question of the precise relationship between its text and the eternal **word of God** (q.v.), although some verses have been taken to argue for their being identical. Several times the scripture is announced as a revelation (*tanzīl*) or a revelation of the scripture (*tanzīl al-kitāb*) from God under various of the divine names (e.g. q 17:106; 20:4; 26:192; 32:2; 39:1; 40:2; 41:2, 42; 45:2; 46:2; 56:80; 69:43; 76:23). In q 9:6 the Prophet is told to give refuge to any idolater who asks for it “so that he might hear the speech of God (*kalām Allāh*).” Since there is no qualification of this, it seemed to many commentators to offer proof that the Qurʾān is simply equivalent to God's speech. Further support is sought in q 75:16-8, in which the Prophet is told not to rush ahead of the recitation but to follow it precisely as God recites it.

The reservations about verbal inspiration were based on several factors. There was in the first place the widespread, though not universal, hesitancy about anthropomorphism or anything that blurs the distinction between the divine and the created realms. For God to have produced the actual wording of the scripture would involve him in the use of human language with its sounds, script and grammar, all of which are clearly created (see **ARABIC SCRIPT; GRAMMAR AND THE QURʾĀN; ORTHOGRAPHY**). Secondly, in the religiously plural context in which the Muslim community lived (see **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE QURʾĀN; COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY IN THE QURʾĀN**), it had to be recognized that the other scriptures are not textually identical to the Qurʾān, even though in principle the import of the message should be identical. This led to such distinctions as that made by Ibn Kullāb (d. 241/855?) between *qirāʾa* — the recited ¶ wording, which is a material human action — and *maqrūʾa* — what is recited, i.e. what God intends to convey by it (van Ess, *TG*, iv, 615-6; see **RECITATION OF THE QURʾĀN**). Furthermore, it could not be ignored that there were at least seven recognized **readings of the Qurʾān** (q.v.) and strong opposition to the idea of canonizing any one of them absolutely. If only the unpointed consonants (*rasm*) were canonized, the way remained open to multiple pronunciations, and therefore multiple versions, based upon it.

For the **Muʿtazilīs** (q.v.), what we have on earth is never the word of God itself but rather an account or report (*ḥikāya*) of what God said, a kind of indirect speech. The speech of God is created in a physical substrate — for example, the burning bush associated with Moses (cf. q 28:30). Even in Gabriel it is created. Ibn Kullāb preferred the term *ibāra* to the suspect notion of *ḥikāya*, but in the final analysis there was little difference between his and the Muʿtazilī position on this point. Van Ess (*TG*, iv, 622) notes that even the custom of quoting the Qurʾān with the introductory words *qāla llāhu*, “God says,” was not always allowed to pass unchallenged for its presumption of identity between the words of the Qurʾān and the word of God.

It should be noted that the belief in the verbal inspiration of the Qurʾān does not necessarily entail a belief in its uncreated nature, as the Muʿtazilīs seemed to fear. It is possible for God to determine the precise wording of the Qurʾān even while knowing the inability of human language fully to express and convey divine thought.

The complexity of the understanding of revelation in the tradition

It is beyond the scope of this article to deal systematically with the doctrines of revelation that developed in the Islamic community over the centuries. Some com-¶ ments, however, are in order. The discussions of revelation by theologians, commentators and philosophers seem often to conflict (see **PHILOSOPHY AND THE QURʾĀN; EXEGESIS OF THE QURʾĀN: CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL**). Things become clearer, perhaps, if one sees that the discussion has tried to balance a series of tensions. Since the divine is so often defined in negative terms and often through the negation of any similarity to the human, it should not be surprising that theories of revelation are full of paradox and tension. As Izutsu (*God*, 153-4) put it, the Qurʾān, being God's speech, is divine but it is also speech; it therefore conforms to the models and limitations of all speech.

The tradition wants to assert the immediacy of the revelation to the God who speaks, an immediacy on which it depends for its reliability. At the same time it recognizes the mediation required logically and theologically by the absolute ontological distance between God and creation, and even the relative distance between the human and the angelic.

Through the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl* the tradition focuses on the concrete historicity of the text in its interactions with the Prophet and his hearers. At the same time it argues for its pre-existent, timeless nature.

The text has a very obvious cultural and linguistic particularity and the tradition stresses this in its attachment to and celebration of the Arabic of the Qurʾān. At the same time it insists on its universal appeal and applicability.

The tradition carefully observes the delimited extent and content of the qurʾānic text. At the same time, it asserts the unlimited scope and import of the revelation.

Certain key terms for the understanding and interpretation of the Qurʾān have spatial and temporal significance (the heavenly Preserved Tablet, sending down, **abroga-¶ tion** [q.v.], forgetting or causing to forget; see also **SATANIC VERSES**). At the same time, the tradition is aware of the problematic nature of attributing spatial and temporal characteristics to God.

The tradition maintains the uniqueness of the Qurʾān. Yet, on the other hand, it asserts the Qurʾān's commonality with the earlier revealed scriptures.

The Qurʾān itself and the tradition assert the inprinciple identity of the message to that of the earlier scriptures. At the same time, it is aware that in fact there is a divergence among them (see **FORGERY; CORRUPTION; POLEMIC AND POLEMICAL LANGUAGE; APOLOGETICS**).

The Muslim tradition insists strongly that the Qurʾān is the sole revealed scripture to have been faithfully recorded and preserved in its original form. At the same time, the fact that only the unpointed consonantal text (*rasm*) is canonized means that in effect the canon is kept open by the many possible pronunciations (*laḫẓ*) based on the same *ductus* — some of them doctrinally significant (e.g. q 2:106).

These tensions are a necessary factor in any theory of revelation because it must account at the same time for the divine and human aspects of the phenomenon. Although

Islamic tradition has not succeeded in developing a single coherent theology of revelation, the idea remains central to the **religion**. God's constancy in revelation shows his engagement with the world, the ceaseless activity of addressing the human situation and providing for human need.

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