

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

REVELATION

"REVELATION" - SCRIPTURES

Jewish Text

Exodus (Shemot) 19: 1-21

- א** בַּח דָּשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי.
- ב** וַיִּסְעוּ מֵרְפִידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַר וַיַּחֲנוּ-שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר.
- ג** וּמִשָּׁה עָלָה אֶל-הָאֵל קָיָם וַיְקַרָּא אֵלָיו ה' מִן-הָהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יִעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
- ד** אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל-כַּנְפֵי נְשָׂרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי.
- ה** וְעַתָּה אִם-שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי וְהִיִּיתֶם לִי סֻגָּלָה מְכֹל-הָעַמִּים כִּי-לִי כָל-הָאֶרֶץ.
- ו** וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
- ז** וַיָּבֹאוּ מִשָּׁה וַיְקַרָּא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיִּשָּׂם לְפָנֵיהֶם אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ ה'.
- ח** וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל-הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁבַּח מִשָּׁה אֶת-דְּבַרֵי הָעָם אֶל-ה'.
- ט** וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַב הָעָנָן בְּעַבּוֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עַמֶּךָ וְגַם-בְּךָ יֶאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם וַיִּגַּד מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבַרֵי הָעָם אֶל-ה'.
- י** וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל-הָעָם וְקִדַּשְׁתָּם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וּכְבַסוּ שִׁמְלֹתָם.
- יא** וְהָיוּ נֹכְחֵי לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד ה' לַעֲיִנֵי כָל-הָעָם עַל-הָר סִינַי.
- יב** וְהִגְבַּלְתָּ אֶת-הָעָם סָבִיב לְאֹמֶר הַשְּׁמָרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקִצְהוּ כָל-הַנֶּגַע בְּהָר מוֹת יוֹמָת.
- יג** לֹא-תִגַּע בּוֹ יָד כִּי-סִקּוּל יִסְקַל אוֹ-יָרֵה יִיָּרֶה אִם-בְּהִמָּה אִם-אִישׁ לֹא יִחַיָּה בְּמִשְׁךָ הִי בֵּל הִמָּה יַעֲלוּ בְּהָר.

יד וַיֵּרֶד מִן־הָהָר אֶל־הָעָם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֶת־הָעָם וַיַּכְבְּסוּ
 שְׂמֹלֹתָם.
טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָעָם הָיוּ נֹכְחֵי נִים לְשָׁלֹשׁ יָמִים אֶל־תִּגְוָשׁוּ אֶל־
 אֲשֶׁה.
טז וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בִּהְיוֹת הַבֶּקָר וַיְהִי קֹלֹת וּבְרָקִים וַעֲנָן
 כָּבֵד עַל־הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרַד כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר
 בַּמַּחֲנֶה.
יז וַיּוֹצֵא מִן־הָעָם לְקִרְאֵת הָאֵלֶּיךָ. ים מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְּבוּ
 בְּתַחֲתֵית הָהָר.
יח וַהֲרִי אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה כְּלֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׂנוּ
 כְּעֹשֶׂה הַכִּבְשָׁן וַיִּחַרַד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד.
יט וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֲזָק מְאֹד מִן־הָאֵשׁ וַיִּדְבֹר וַהֲאֵלֶּיךָ. ים
 יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל.
כ וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל־הָרִי אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא ה' לְמִן־הָאֵשׁ אֶל־
 רִאֵשׁ הָהָר וַיַּעַל מִן־הָאֵשׁ.
כא וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רַד הָעֵד בְּעַם פֶּן־יִהְרָסוּ אֶל־ה' לְרְאוֹת
 וְנִפְל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב.

Exodus (Shemot) 19: 1-21

¹ On the third new moon of the Israelites' going out from Egypt, on that very day they came to the wilderness of Sinai. ² And they travelled from Rephidim and they came to the wilderness of Sinai and they made camp in the desert, and they made camp there over against the mountain. ³ And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the children of Israel: ⁴"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and I bore you on the wings of eagles, and I brought you to me. ⁵ And now, if you will truly heed My voice and keep My covenant, you will become for Me a treasure among all the peoples, for Mine is all the earth. ⁶ And as for you, you will become for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.

⁷ And Moses came and he called to the elders of the people, and he set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸ And all the people answered together and said, 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we shall do.' And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord. ⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, 'Look, I am about to come to you in the cloud of clouds, so that the people may hear as I speak to you, and you too they will trust for ever.' And Moses told the people's words to the Lord. ¹⁰ And the Lord said to

Moses, 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their clothes. ¹¹ And they shall be ready for the third day, for on the third day the Lord shall come down before the eyes of all the people on Mount Sinai. ¹² And you shall set bounds for the people all around, saying; "Guard yourselves not to go up on the mountain or to touch its border. Anyone who touches the mountain shall surely die. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot, whether beast or man, he shall not live." When the ram's horn blows long, they will go up on the mountain.'

¹⁴ And Moses came down from the mountain to the people, and he consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, 'Ready yourselves for three days; do not go near a woman.'

¹⁶ And it happened on the third day, as it became morning, that there was thunder and lightnings and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the ram's horn, very strong, and all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ And Moses brought out the people towards God from the camp, and they stationed themselves at the bottom of the mountain. ¹⁸ And Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And the sound of the ram's horn grew stronger and stronger. Moses would speak and the Lord answered him in a voice. ²⁰ And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, to the mountain top, and the Lord called Moses to the mountain top, and Moses went up. ²¹ And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to see and many of them fall. ²² And the priests too, who come near to the Lord, shall consecrate themselves, lest the Lord burst out against them.' ²³ And Moses said to the Lord, 'The people will not be able to come up to Mount Sinai, for You Yourself warned us, saying "Set bounds to the mountain and consecrate it.'" ²⁴ And the Lord said to him, 'Go, go down, and you shall come up, you and Aaron with you, but the priests and the people shall not break through to go up to the Lord, lest He burst forth against them.' ²⁵ And Moses went down to the people and told them.

Glosses

v. 2: 'over against' - *neged*. This word has a variety of meanings: 'opposite', 'against', 'in front of', 'before', 'in the presence of', 'contrary to'.

v. 5: 'if you will truly heed My voice' - *im-shamoa tishme'u beqoli*. The Hebrew phrase doubles the verb 'to hear, heed' to emphasize its importance (represented in this translation by adding the word 'truly'). 'To listen to someone's voice' also means 'to obey someone' in Hebrew.

v. 5: 'a treasure' - *segulah*. The word has connotations of a precious object.

v. 7: 'all the words' - *kol hadevarim*. *Davar* means both 'word' and 'thing'.

- v. 9: 'a cloud of clouds' - *be'av he'anan*. Both 'av and 'anan mean 'cloud'. The translation here is as literal as possible; other translations are 'a thick cloud' (taking 'av to be derived from the word 'aveh, 'thick') and 'utmost cloud'.
- v. 10: 'consecrate them' - *veqidashtam*. The root here (*q-d-sh*) means 'holy', 'separated'.
- v. 13: 'No hand shall touch him' - *lo tiga bo yad*. This could also be translated as 'No hand shall touch it' (i.e. the mountain).
- v. 13: 'they will go up on the mountain' - *hemah ya'alu bahar*. *Hemah* is an emphatic word for 'they'; it probably refers to Moses and Aaron here.
- v. 16: 'thunder' - *qolot*. *Qol* can mean 'voice', 'sound' or 'thunder'; see also its appearance at the end of v. 19, where God answers Moses *veqol*, 'in a voice' or perhaps 'in thunder'.
- v. 17: 'they stationed themselves' - *veyityatsvu*. This is not based on the usual root for 'standing' ('amad); the root *nitsav* has connotations of standing firmly or upright.

Christian Text

Acts 9: 1-19

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' ⁵ And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, 'Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' ¹³ But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.' ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

Glosses

v. 2: 'the Way' – *tes hodou*, this is a term often used by Luke to refer to the Church.

v. 5: 'I am Jesus' – *ego eimi Iesous*, this 'I am' statement resonates with a series of 'I am' statements made by Jesus in the (probably later) Gospel of John—for example, 'I am the way, the truth and the life', and 'I am the resurrection and the life'. These in turn may evoke God's words to Moses from the burning bush, in which he gives his 'name' as 'I Am Who I Am'.

v. 15: 'chosen instrument' – *skeuos ekloges*, lit. 'vessel of choice'.

- v. 17: 'be filled with the Holy Spirit' – *plesthes pneumatos hagiou*, a phrase used of other key figures at key moments in the New Testament narratives—for example, Elizabeth when she greets the pregnant Mary in Luke 1: 41, and her husband Zechariah before his inspired song in Luke 1: 68-79, and the apostles on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 4).
- v. 18: 'he rose' – *anastas*, lit. 'rising up'; this word has the same root as the word for 'resurrection'.

Islamic Text 1 **[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]**

Surah Al 'Imran ('The Family of 'Imran', 3: 1-9), Medinan

In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

¹ *alif lam mim*

² God (Allah). There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal.

³ It is He Who sent down to thee (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the criterion (of judgement between right and wrong).

⁴ Then those who reject faith in the signs of Allah will suffer the severest penalty, and Allah is exalted in might, Lord of retribution.

⁵ From Allah, verily nothing is hidden on earth or in the heavens.

⁶ He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no god but He, the Exalted in might, the Wise.

⁷ He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, they say: 'We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord': and none will grasp the message except men of understanding.

⁸ 'Our Lord!' (they say), 'Let not our hearts deviate now after Thou hast guided us, but grant us mercy from Thine own Presence; for Thou art the grantor of bounties without measure.'

⁹ 'Our Lord! Thou art He that will gather mankind together against a day about which there is no doubt; for Allah never fails in His promise.'

Glosses

ayah 3: 'the Law' - *Tawrah*, 'Torah. The translation of this as 'Law' is by A. Y. Ali.

ayah 3: 'the Gospel' - *Injil*, thought to be related to the Greek *evangel*.

Islamic Text 2

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-Shu'ara' ('The Poets', 26: 192-227), Meccan

¹⁹² Verily, this is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds:
¹⁹³ with it came down the spirit of faith and truth—
¹⁹⁴ to your heart and mind (O Muhammad), that you may admonish
¹⁹⁵ in the perspicuous Arabic tongue.
¹⁹⁶ Without doubt it is (announced) in the revealed Books of former peoples.
¹⁹⁷ Is it not a sign to them that the learned of the Children of Israel knew it (as true)?
¹⁹⁸ Had We revealed it to any of the non-Arabs,
¹⁹⁹ and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it.
²⁰⁰ Thus have We caused it to enter the hearts of the sinners.
²⁰¹ They will not believe in it until they see the grievous penalty;
²⁰² but the (penalty) will come to them of a sudden, while they perceive it not;
²⁰³ then they will say: 'Shall we be respited?'
²⁰⁴ Do they then ask for Our penalty to be hastened on?
²⁰⁵ Do you see? If We do let them enjoy (this life) for a few years,
²⁰⁶ yet there comes to them at length the (punishment) which they were promised!
²⁰⁷ It will profit them not that they enjoyed (this life)!
²⁰⁸ Never did We destroy a population, but had its warners—
²⁰⁹ by way of reminder; and We never are unjust.
²¹⁰ No evil ones have brought down this (revelation):
²¹¹ it would neither suit them nor would they be able (to produce it).
²¹² Indeed they have been removed far from even (a chance of) hearing it.
²¹³ So call not on any other god with Allah, or thou wilt be among those under the penalty.
²¹⁴ And admonish thy nearest kinsmen,
²¹⁵ and lower thy wing to the believers who follow thee.
²¹⁶ Then if they disobey thee, say: 'I am free (of responsibility) for what ye do!',
²¹⁷ and put thy trust on the Mighty, the Merciful—
²¹⁸ Who sees thee standing forth (in prayer),
²¹⁹ and thy movements among those who prostrate themselves,
²²⁰ for it is He Who hears and knows all things.
²²¹ Shall I inform you, (O people!), on whom it is that the evil ones descend?
²²² They descend on every lying, wicked person,
²²³ (into whose ears) they pour hearsay vanities, and most of them are liars.
²²⁴ And the poets—it is those straying in Evil, who follow them:
²²⁵ seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley?
²²⁶ And that they say what they practise not?
²²⁷ Except those who believe, work righteousness, engage much in the remembrance of Allah, and defend themselves only after they are unjustly attacked. And soon will the unjust assailants know what vicissitudes their affairs will take!

Glosses

ayah 194: 'to your heart and mind' - literally, 'to your heart'.

ayah 197: Traditionally, this is a reference to the conversion to Islam of the Jewish rabbi, scholar and leader, 'Abdullah bin Salam, in Medina at the hands of the Prophet. Ibn Salam went on to become a respected Muslim leader and military commander. It is said that he was so tall that whilst sitting on a horse, his feet would touch the floor!

ayat 210, 221: 'evil ones' - literally 'satans'.

"REVELATION" – TRADITIONS OF READING

JEWISH TEXT

Introduction and Context

This text comes from the first and most important part of the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible—the Torah ('Teaching'). Consisting of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the Torah is traditionally believed to have been given by God to Moses (c. 1250 BCE).

The second book, Exodus (Shemot), recounts the story of the Israelites' sufferings in Egypt under Pharaoh; Moses' encounter with God and (rather reluctant) acceptance of his mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the land promised to their ancestors by God; and God's mighty acts in delivering them from slavery there. After crossing the Red Sea, which God divides to make a path for the people, they make their way to Mount Sinai. Our text records God's revelation of Himself to the people, and is immediately followed by the Ten Commandments (*aseret hadibrot*, the 'Ten Sayings', in Hebrew; the traditional total count of commandments in the Torah is 613).

The revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah is celebrated and re-experienced every year on the festival of Shavuot ('Weeks', in May-June), when this text and the Ten Commandments that follow it are read in synagogue.

Points to Consider

- Are human beings merely an audience for divine revelation, or do they play an active part in it?
- Is there any significance in the timing and location of the revelation—between the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the promised land?
- Is this revelation for all humanity or just for the Jewish people?

The Text in Tradition and Today

The revelation at Mount Sinai is central to Jewish ideas of our relationship to God. The 20th-century Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) emphasized the three fundamental categories of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption, which underlie much Jewish thought, and also have a time-linked aspect—past, present, and future. Since Revelation is the mode of the present, it is of particular significance and immediacy.

Historically, Revelation is embodied in God's gift of the Torah (including the Ten Commandments) at Sinai, and thus, for Jews, study of Torah is a process of Revelation—a dialogue in which we listen to God's voice, just as we did at Sinai, and respond to it—as we did then. The midrash (early rabbinic commentary, c. 1st to 8th centuries CE, often couched as narratives) claims that the souls of all Jews—both those alive then and those still unborn—stood

together at Sinai', so to engage with Torah is to transcend time in one's relationship with God:

On verse 19: 'And Moses would [literally: 'will'] speak': Not the past but the future tense is used, for he was to speak with each person in each subsequent generation. Whoever wishes to purify himself and take upon himself the yoke of Torah is addressed by Moses.

(From a hasidic sermon by Aharon of Karlin, *Beit aharon*, 1875)

Why is the festival of Shavuot called 'the Occasion of the Giving of our Torah' and not 'the Occasion of the Receiving of our Torah'? Said Rabbi Menachem of Kotzk [1787-1859] in the name of Rabbi Simchah Bunem of Przysucha [1765-1827]: 'The giving of the Torah took place in the month of Sivan [when Shavuot falls], but the receiving of the Torah takes place every day.' Rabbi Menachem said further: 'The giving of the Torah was the same for everyone, but the receiving is different for each person according to their ability to understand.'

Another aspect of the Sinai experience was the establishment of a covenant between God and the entire nation (God's previous covenants, with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had been with individuals and their future descendants). This covenant endures today, with the Torah constituting the document that records it. Traditional commentators often observed that this revelation of God was unique in being witnessed by a large number of people (600,000 adult men, not counting women, children, and the elderly, according to the Torah), rather than by a single prophet, and claimed this as unassailable proof of the Torah's divine origin:

On verse 25: 'And Moses went down to the people...': Maimonides [philosopher, 1135-1204] said that as far as the first two commandments were concerned, the people assembled before Mount Sinai understood them as well as did Moses; for miracles are understood equally well by those who witness them as by prophets. Know that the Sinai event was a supernatural happening, a miracle, for it cannot happen naturally that an entire people are given the gift of prophecy at one and the same time, concerning the same matter. It only happened on this one occasion.

(Netanel ben Yeshayah, *Me'or Ha'afelah*, Yemen, 14th century CE)

Every word of the account was analysed and interpreted to yield further insights into the nature of God's revelation to human beings, sometimes producing penetrating psychological and moral observations:

On verse 3: '...Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the children of Israel': Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moses: 'Go ask the daughters of Israel if they will accept the Torah'; for men generally follow the views of their wives, as it is written: 'This shall you say to the house of Jacob'—this refers to the women—and tell the children of Israel—this refers to the men.

On verse 2: ‘...and they made camp [*vayachanu* - plural] in the desert, and they made camp [*vayichan* - singular] there over against the mountain’: *Midrash Tanchuma* [6th-8th centuries CE] explains the change: The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Torah to Israel when they came out of Egypt, but they were arguing with one another and saying the whole time ‘Let us go back to Egypt’, as is implied by the plural form of the verb. But when they got to Sinai they were in accord with one another and united. How do we know this? Because the singular form is used. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘The Torah is all about peace; to whom then shall I give it? To a people that loves peace.’

An ancient and still popular metaphor daringly imagines the Revelation at Sinai as a wedding, with God playing the part of the bridegroom, the Jewish people being the bride, Moses acting as best man, and the Torah serving as the marriage contract:

On verse 17: ‘Moses brought out the people towards God...’. Rabbi Chakhinai said: Moses went out into the camp of Israel to awaken them. He said, ‘Rouse yourselves! The bridegroom has already come asking for the bride, and He is waiting to lead her under the bridal canopy.’ God was waiting to give them the Torah, and His best man came to get the bride just the way a best man always does for his friend, as it is written: ‘Moses brought out the people towards God’. Then the bridegroom came out to meet the bride—to give them the Torah.

(*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*, 9th-century midrash)

Many other issues have been discussed in the commentary on this text, such as the question of free will (did God force the Jewish people to accept the Torah?), the nature of the encounter with God (mystical interpretations come into play here), and the relationship of the Written Torah to the Oral Torah (embodied in the Mishnah, Talmud and Jewish law).

The sources quoted above are all traditional. Since the 19th century, with the development of the Conservative, Reform, Liberal, and Reconstructionist movements in Judaism, a much wider spectrum of beliefs and opinions about the nature of revelation has developed. Positions vary from belief in the divine authorship of the Torah, to varying degrees of divine inspiration granted to human authors of the Torah, to regarding the Torah as a completely human document that is no more than an important part of an ongoing process of revelation that occurs through the interaction of humanity and God throughout history. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that most Jews regard this text as central to their understanding of the relationship of God to humankind, and as a rich source of exploration and investigation of that relationship.

A Muslim perspective on the Jewish Text

Exodus: 'third new moon'. This clearly refers to the visible new crescent moon, does it not? Do you agree with the Israeli New Moon Society who are arguing for the return of celebrating festivals based on the visible new crescent moon, rather than the Jewish practice of the last two millennia of basing these on astronomical conjunction, which typically makes every festival a day too early? Interestingly, there is a massive controversy amongst Muslim countries over this matter: although Muslims agree that dates are according to visibility of the new moon, confusion over conjunction means that many Muslims also celebrate festivals a day 'too early' on the same day as their Jewish counterparts.

In the Qur'an, Mount Sinai is raised above the Israelites when the covenant is taken from them. Traditionalist commentators take this literally: the angels picked up the mountain and threatened to drop it on the Israelites if they did not comply; rationalist commentators say that this simply refers to the awesome and majestic sight of Mount Sinai towering above them.

The ram's horn is interesting. When the method of announcing congregational prayers was being discussed by the Prophet and his companions in Medina, some companions suggested the Jewish and Christian methods of blowing a horn and ringing bells, respectively. The Muslims settled on the method of the call to prayer (*adhan*) by a human voice, based on a dream seen by several companions and endorsed by the Prophet.

CHRISTIAN TEXT

Introduction and Context

The Book of Acts is a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke, taking the story on further from Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world, to Rome, the centre of the Gentile world. Amongst other things, the Book recounts Paul's conversion and his great missionary journeys, as well as some key events and decisions in the life of the first Christian communities (like the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the decision not to make circumcision or the observance of Jewish dietary laws a requirement for new Christian converts).

Paul, whose conversion is narrated here (and re-narrated on two other occasions in the book: 22: 3-16 and 26: 4-18), was until this moment known as Saul of Tarsus. He was a ferocious persecutor of the first Christians and it is narrated how he stood by and 'consented' when the Christian deacon Stephen was stoned to death in Jerusalem. Ironically, the persecutions themselves gave impetus to the movement of Christian 'Hellenists' out of Jerusalem and into the first pathways of the Gentile mission, and it was service of just this mission (but in a more positive form!) that was to be the mark of the remainder of Paul's life.

Chapter 9, which we have here, comes at the point in the Book of Acts when narration of the early stages of the life of the Jerusalem Church, and the doings of the twelve apostles (until then particularly Peter), suddenly shifts beyond Jerusalem. The geographical expansion is matched by an expansion of the tight-knit boundaries of apostleship to include Paul, who never knew Jesus in his pre-resurrection life, but fights to be recognized as a genuine hander-on of Jesus to others, on a par with the Twelve.

Points to Consider

- Is Paul the only one to receive revelation in this passage?
- Is revelation something in the face of which human beings are shown to be completely passive, or are they invited to participate in it in some way?
- What is actually revealed to Paul on the road?

The Text in Tradition and Today

There is a pattern to Paul's conversion here which will be closely repeated in chapter 10, when the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his family are converted by the apostle Peter. In both cases, there is a 'double' vision—a vision both to the convert and his inductor. The visions cross-reference each other and draw the two key people together into encounter, finally resulting in a new relationship for the convert with God and Church. Both conclude in baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit.

Is this the real goal of revelation: incorporation into the community of the faithful, and a new life in the Spirit? The revelation to Paul on the road to Damascus is hardly much to do with the imparting of special new *information* about God. Instruction in his new vocation is to come later for Paul. All he receives here is a question ('Why?') and a statement of identity ('I am Jesus'). And, seemingly paradoxically, he is deprived of sight in this moment—so that revelation seems to lead to a literal 'seeing less'. Is some kind of 'seeing less' a necessary part of revelation? Do we also find a 'seeing more' in the passage, and if so, where?

What is the light doing here? Is it more a blinding weapon against the persecutor than a medium of communication? Paul's question 'who are you?' certainly suggests the non-revelatory character of the light. He fails at this point to see that there is an identity between his victims and this living *Kyrios* (Lord), an identity implied in Jesus's question: 'why are you persecuting *me*?'. Might it be a different sort of light he needs—perhaps one 'found in darkness' (John 1: 5)?

A Muslim perspective on the Christian Text

The story of Paul's conversion is reminiscent of that of 'Umar bin al-Khattab, second caliph of Islam. 'Umar was from the same noble Meccan tribe as the Prophet and was furious at the new faith's denunciation of the idolatrous ways of his ancestors. 'Umar was a strong and forceful man, and vigorously persecuted the Muslims for nine years in Mecca. Tradition has it that he even resolved to kill the Prophet Muhammad, and thus end the discord in Mecca. On his way to achieve this, he came across his own sister, who had converted to Islam, reciting the Qur'an. The words of the Qur'an had a sudden miraculous effect on him and he immediately converted to the new faith, becoming one of the Prophet's closest friends and the faith's staunchest supporters. 'Umar's reign as caliph included the conquest of Jerusalem, Palestine/Syria, Egypt and Persia. The justice and strictness of 'Umar's rule is proverbial in Islam.

Saul's not eating, drinking or seeing for three nights is reminiscent of God's sign to Zakariyya (Zachariah) to reassure him about the news of a baby boy named Yahya (John): that he would not speak to people for three days and three nights, without being struck dumb. Zakariyya communicated with his people using gestures and indications. This 'communication' is described in the Qur'an as a type of revelation ('inspiration').

ISLAMIC TEXTS

Introduction and Context

Surah Al-'Imran ('The Family of 'Imran' [the father of Mary, mother of Jesus], no. 3) is a Medinan *surah* (chapter) and the second-longest one after its 'twin' *surah al-Baqarah* ('The Cow', no. 2), also Medinan. Both these *surahs* begin with the mysterious letters *alif lam mim*, open with a reference to revelation, and pursue arguments and theological disputes with Jews and Christians as major themes. Stories of Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ are recounted in this *surah*, as are lessons from the Battle of Uhud that was fought at the edge of Medina by the Muslims against the polytheists of Mecca.

A crucial point in *ayah* (verse) 7 can be read in two different ways, depending on where one stops:

1. ... but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, they say: 'We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord' ...
2. ... but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, who say: 'We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord' ...

I have tried to render the English in such a way that both readings are possible; surprisingly, most translators do not do this, preferring the popular and theologically-safer reading 1. However, leading commentators almost always mention that 2 is also a valid possibility.

Surah al-Shu'ara ('The Poets', no. 26) is medium-length Meccan *surah* with a large number of short *ayat*. A striking feature is the account of the stories of Moses, Noah, the Arabian prophets Hud and Salih, Lot and Shu'ayb of Midian in a similar format, emphasising the similarity of their message of divine unity and the fate of the people who rejected their message, all of whom were destroyed by acts of God. Every account is followed by the refrain, 'Truly, in this are signs: but most of them were not going to be believers. And truly, your Lord is indeed the mighty, the merciful.' The *ayat* selected here comprise the concluding passage of the *surah*, which immediately follows the above-mentioned stories of the prophets.

Points to Consider

- Does the mention of the Law (Torah) and Gospel (Evangel) in *Al-Imran* 3 provide a basis for engagement with Jews and Christians, as later passages in this *surah* do?
- What does *Al-Imran* 7 tell us about the nature of God's revelation? What significance do the two possible readings have here?
- The revelation is to Muhammad's heart ('The Poets', *ayah* 194). What does this mean?
- The revelation is in clear Arabic, and could not have been revealed to a non-Arab ('The Poets', *ayah* 192-9). How is this consistent with the idea that the Qur'an is a universal message for all of humanity?
- The final sub-passage of 'The Poets' (*ayah* 210-227) contrasts revelation from God via angels with revelations via devils to deluded people, such as faithless poets. What is the relationship, if any, between poets and prophets, between poetry and scripture?

The Text in Tradition and Today

The Family of 'Imran

Ibn Taymiyyah and others easily reconcile the two readings of *ayah* 7 with reference to a teaching of 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas, the Prophet's young cousin and disciple who later become one of the greatest authorities in Qur'anic commentary, traditionally due to the prayer and blessing of the Prophet himself in this regard. Ibn 'Abbas said that understanding of the Qur'an applies at least four levels:

1. Basic knowledge of the teachings of the Qur'an that every Muslim must have, since this relates to the simple foundations of the faith.
2. Knowledge that only those versed in Arabic can fathom.
3. Understanding that only those firmly-grounded in knowledge can attain, as described in *ayah* 7, reading 2.
4. Knowledge that only God has.

The Poets

On the Arabic vs. non-Arabic issue, a significant clue can be found, as usual, in the basic Arabic words.

The root of the Arabic word for 'Arabic' (*'arab*) means 'to wander' (hence the Arab nomads), to express eloquently. The word for 'non-Arab' (*'ajam*) means 'a dumb beast'.

The idea is that pure Arabic (as opposed to modern, colloquial Arabic!) is the purest and most expressive and eloquent of all human languages, which are elsewhere in the Qur'an described as signs of God in their diversity. Those who do not speak with such eloquence are, as it were, dumb.

The 'descending' by devils upon deluded poets is analogous to the 'descending' by angels with revelation and with God's commands to carry out. These verses were thus quoted by the Prophet's companions to describe some of the early false prophets who claimed to receive revelations, and Muslims have continued to respond to such claimants until today: 'Yes, you are receiving revelations—from the Devil!'

Ayah 225 has obvious literal and metaphorical meanings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Copyright

Jewish Commentary: *Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, London School of Jewish Studies © 2008*

Christian Commentary: *Prof. Ben Quash, Kings College London © 2008*

Muslim Commentary: *Dr Usama Hasan, The Islamic Foundation UK © 2008*

www.scripturalreasoning.org