

Nuzul al-Quran

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The term *nuzul* is derived from the root *nazala*, n-z-l (نزل) —translated as descent, usually in reference to the descent of the Quran—*Nuzul al-Quran*. Closely related to this is another kind of descent, *tanazzul* or the descent of Being, also derived from the same root verb. In contrast to the former, this latter descent is less familiar to many. But for *Nuzul al-Quran* to take place, it has to be preceded by the descent of Being or *Tanazzul*—the particular manner the One Being of God manifests or makes Itself known from complete inwardness (*al-Abad*—at the level of His Essence, *tanzih*, Oneness) to outward manifestation (*al-Wahid*—at the level of creation, *tasbbih*, multiplicity). From this understanding, for the descent to occur, there is already a connotation of something ‘sent or brought down’ (*tanzil* also derives from the root verb *nazala*) from a higher world to a lower world, implying the existence of several worlds. Hence, the sending down is from the celestial concealed world (*‘alam al-Ghayb*) to the witnessed world of the *dunyā*. Both aspects of the descent occurs beyond time and space, so an understanding of the reality of time is needed as it is the link that connects the One Being of God and the apparent multiplicity of this witnessed world.¹ For God is the ground of all being, and everything that exists can only exist because it is an aspect of that Divine Reality, hence an aspect of Divine Unity itself.

In the history of Islam, there have been many explanations of *Nuzul al-Quran*. In the usual understanding, the descent is described as taking place in two stages. The first was an instantaneous descent from its

¹ This is what *tauhid* entails—the interconnectedness of creations and its dependence on God.

heavenly origin or *al-Lawh al-Mahfuz* ('the well-guarded Tablet' or 'the Preserved Tablet,' Q85:22) to this world of the *dunyā* on the Night of Power (*laylat al-qadr*), while the second was the piecemeal revelation to Prophet Muhammad (*saw*)² by the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years.

Muslims believe that the revelation is God's Word, and they regard the contexts of the revelation as important. As the circumstances of revelation are unique, an understanding of how it was received and understood by the Prophet, how the descent occurred into his 'heart'—that invisible human-divine reality the Qur'an calls the *qalb*—and how it was later received by his contemporaries, are crucial. So, to understand the Quran and to grasp its spirit correctly, to feel and hear it as the Arabs did at the time it was revealed, we need to go back in time to understand their culture and their language.

We will begin this study by considering some aspects of the cultural milieu of Arabs at the time, the peculiarities of Arabic language and thought, oral tradition versus written words, and the distinction between the Quran as a recitation and a *mushaf* or codex, the Invisible Reality (*ālam al-Ghayb*) and the notions of Time and Space, notably that of Time.

After that, we will consider *nuzul* al-Quran, or descent of the revelation from God to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel as well as Muhammad himself—the prophet who was both the medium and the message from God to humanity. Inherent in *nuzul* also is the understanding of its message, and the way the Quran puts its stories together to be presented to its listeners.

The Cultural Milieu of the Pre-Islamic Arabs

To understand the Quran and its spirit correctly, one needs to grasp it the way the Arabs of that time did, for it was addressed to them in their tongue (Q26:192-195—'And Truly it is a revelation of the Lord of the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit, upon thine heart—that thou mayest be among the warners—in a clear, Arabic tongue'). Thus, a

² Whenever the name of the Beloved Prophet is mentioned in this study, the reader should be mindful that his blessed name is intended to be accompanied by the appropriate blessing, denoted here by the epithet 'saw' (*sallallahu alayhi wa salaam* – may Allah's prayers and peace be with him). For convenience, the epithet is not mentioned hereafter, but the reader should understand that the blessing is intended on each mention hereafter of the Beloved Prophet's name.

knowledge of their culture, language and thought are paramount. It is the interconnectedness of language and thought as a structured system of communication that enables people to express meaning. While we may find our assumptions and worldview being challenged, we need to suspend these and be willing to open up to other alternatives.

Pre-Islamic Arabs were a society of *Jabiliyyah* or ignorance, steeped in superstition, social injustice and tribal warfare. A description of the period can be gauged in the words of Ja'far b. Abu Talib, a cousin of the Prophet when he responded to the Negus of Abyssinia's question regarding the new religion, 'O King, we were a people steeped in ignorance, worshipping idols, eating unsacrificed carrion, committing abominations, and the strong would devour the weak...' ³ It was a lawless and immoral tribal society with countless clans constantly warring with one another, and protection was only guaranteed by belonging to a clan.

Pre-Islamic Arabs looked highly upon their race, bloodline, and customs, and especially on their language. While each tribe had its own dialect, making it difficult to understand each other, the language of poetry, known as *'arabiya* transcended all dialects, resulting in a common identity that provided the foundation for a uniform memory that was passed down from one generation to another. ⁴ To the Arabs of the *Jabiliyyah*, poetry was not only the means of intertribal communication, it was also the repository of their culture. Indeed, to be a poet was to be esteemed within society, and the poet was believed to possess arcane knowledge or magical powers.

Inherent in the understanding of the Arabic of the time was the associative connection between language and meaning. There was an awareness of the enchantment intrinsic in language where the essence of things was expressed *in* words (not *by means of* words) and where subject and object were linked by a common power or energy. ⁵ There were no empty words, for words were alchemically synonymous with deeds. Poetry functioned well in such condition for during conflict or intertribal violence, words compacted into rhythmic verses like chanting became real in their effects. Uttering them became like a weapon to

³ Martin Lings, *Mubammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 83.

⁴ Navid Kermani, *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*. Trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 60-61.

⁵ *ibid.* 52

pierce the soul. At the same time, poetry was also used to gratify, praise, extol and venerate.

Words too could make a person guilty, as seen in the case of the slander against Aisha, the wife of the Prophet (Q24:11-22). Even the Prophet could not do anything until her innocence was disclosed via revelation. Further attestation to the outlook of the time was the multiple oaths used in the Quran testifying to the power of words, for an oath sworn had the ability to make something true or otherwise. It was a time when a word was associatively one with the object or the act that it named. Thus, the word was real, depicting an object, as concrete as any natural object. This magical function of language has mostly lost its import nowadays because it has been demythologized by the alphabets, where words have been reduced to letters, replacing sound.

Theirs was an oral tradition, where the dominant sensory organ and social orientation was the ear. Hearing, then, was believing. Marshall McLuhan, in his writings on the media used the notion of acoustic space to characterize communication within the oral tradition.⁶ To quote McLuhan,⁷

Acoustic space is spherical. It is without bounds or vanishing points. It is structured by pitch separation and kinaesthesia. It is not a container. It is not hollowed out. It is the space in which men live before the invention of writing—that translation of the acoustic into the visual. With writing men began to trust their eyes and to structure space visually. Pre-literate man does not trust his eyes very much. The magic is in sound for him, with its powers to evoke the absent.

⁶ McLuhan used the idea of auditory space to explain the working of the media. He later changed the concept of auditory space to acoustic space and applied it to electric information contrasting it with the visual space of writing (alphabetic writing and print). The contrast between visual and acoustic space became one of his central characteristics of media ecology. McLuhan characterized visual space as linear, sequential, one thing at a time, continuous and connected as opposed to the non-linear, simultaneous, discrete and disconnected nature of acoustic space. Acoustic space was not only auditory but also tactile and even visual in the case of television. Acoustic space engages multiple senses whereas visual space only involves the eye (see Emma Findlay-White & Robert K. Logan, 'Acoustic Space, Marshall McLuhan and Links to Medieval Philosophers and Beyond: Center Everywhere and Margin Nowhere.' *Philosophies 1* (2016) 162-169).

⁷ 1987, as cited Donald F. Theall, *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (Canada: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001). 145.

Here, the whole body becomes a receptor, alive to the sounds heard. People in these societies integrate time and space as one and they live in an acoustic, horizonless, boundless, olfactory space, rather than in visual space. It is a world whose center is everywhere and whose margin is nowhere.

In contrast, the phonetic alphabet depends solely on the eye for comprehension. Composed of fragmented bits and parts which have no meaning in themselves, the letters as ink marks on paper, have to be strung together in a line, to form or sound out words to signify things, in order to make meaning. Hence, spelling is just the arranging of letters so as to cast a 'spell.' Knowing is only through signs as meaning is no longer directly perceived as in the oral tradition. Writing fosters and encourages the habit of perceiving the environment in visual and spatial terms; i.e., in terms of a space and a time that are uniform, continuous and connected. This new system of so-called 'rationality' is solely dependent on the presentation of connected and sequential facts or concepts.⁸ Currently, this has become the organizing principle of life, the only way modern Man understands things around him. He has been conditioned by words, so he can no longer purely audit the words, he only inks them. Thus, the rational man is a visual man. The fact that most conscious experience has little 'visuality' in it is lost on him.

The introduction of the phonetic alphabet in the West has replaced the magical world of the ear by the physical world of the eye. This was a huge change, for it is in the nature of sound to spread, a ubiquitous all-pervading sense that opens up the whole psychic substance in receptivity to sight which concentrates only itself upon the object of vision. Consequently, in one stroke of the 'pen,' existence was reduced from a three-dimensional space to only one—no more mystery, no more magic. In other words, modern Man abandoned corporeality for mere physicality. The contrast between acoustic and visual spaces is meant to highlight that during the Prophet's time, it was the former sense that was the more dominant faculty.

During that time, though many pre-Islamic Arabs were idol worshippers, there were also God-worshipping Christians and Jews, mostly in

⁸ Marshall McLuhan & Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (Canada: Gingko Press, 2001), 45.

Medina. It was a time when rhetoric, in the form of poetry or other forms of communication was prevalent. It was an ‘age of exegesis’ that reflected an ongoing evolving debate between these three groups—Christians, Jews, polytheists and the Prophet concerning their religions with respect to the Quran.⁹ Neuwirth distinguished between the Quran as *al-muṣḥaf* or codex (a fixed corpus after the death of the Prophet), and the Quran as the living Word of God—an ongoing oral communication. To her, the Quran is more than a compilation or a literary outcome of a prophetic mission, it is ‘...a metadiscourse, a speech about speech, a comment on the Quranic message itself or on the speech of others’¹⁰ that is fluid and ever-changing. While the Islamic tradition also differentiates between al-Quran as *al-muṣḥaf* and al-Quran as an oral communication, she argues that it is more correct to use the term al-Quran to refer to the chain of oral communication conveyed to the people of Mecca and Medina during the time of the Prophet. Table 1 shows the main differences between the Quran as *muṣḥaf* and as an oral communication.

Figure 1: Differences between the Quran as a *muṣḥaf* and an oral communication (extracted from Neuwirth, 2010)

	<i>Muṣḥaf</i> (as codex or compilation)	Quran (as oral communication)
Nature	Closed text	Open, fluid and dynamic
Order	Single units (<i>surah</i>) collected are juxtaposed, constituting a sort of anthology.	<i>Surah</i> build dynamically on each other, later ones often rethinking earlier ones, sometimes even inscribing themselves into earlier texts.
Extratextual	A monolithic divine account.	A dynamic polyphonic communication between many voices—a lively discourse between societal concerns and theological questions of the Prophet’s community, who listened to the unheard speech of God in the Prophet’s voice (he was the medium) that were addressed to them as well as other communities (polytheists, Jews and Christians) of the time.
Methodology	A divine monologue—a kind of hagiographic account.	An unfolding drama with an exterior and interior level.

The Quran’s descent was as a sound, a voice, with meaning (*ma‘nā*), but at present it is mostly recognized as a *muṣḥaf* (a codex or compilation of the revelation received by the Prophet over the 23 year-period), rather than its original nature as the Recitation (see table). Most have

⁹ Angelika Neuwirth, ‘Two Faces of the Quran: Quran and Muṣḥaf.’ *Oral Tradition* 25:1 (2010) 141.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 142.

now conflated the *mushhaf* and the Quran as the Prophet's recitations.¹¹ But, the moment the recitations are scribed, the letters/words become the focus, and the meaning behind those words tends to recede into the background, becoming thereby a representation or a shadow of itself. This is why, according to some Muslim authorities, the Divine Word has nothing to do with writing and, being uncreated, it is not a medium at all. In this sense, making manifest what is indescribable and inexpressible cannot do justice to the Divine Essence that should remain forever unknowable. In the words of Haydar Amuli,¹²

Letters written with ink do not *really* exist *qua* letters. For the letters are but various forms to which meanings have been assigned through convention. What really and concretely exists is nothing but ink. The 'existence' of the letters is in truth no other than the 'existence' of the ink which is the sole, unique reality that unfolds itself in many forms of self-modification. One has to cultivate, first of all, the eye to see the self-same reality of ink in all letters and then to see the letters as so many intrinsic modifications of the ink.

In this metaphor, due to the predominance of vision, the ink that scribes as well as the origin of that ink, have been forgotten or relegated into the background. The fact that every 'sign' (*āya*) in this world and in the human souls points back to its Source and meaning in the '*ālam al-Ghayb*', is no longer obvious. Understanding then has to be surmised through a process of stringing these letters to form words, to signify things, then only to arrive at meanings. Thus, the Quran as the Recitation, as was understood during the Prophet's time, where words were at-once understood as meanings, had to be reworked.

¹¹ This is similar to the distinction made by Mohammed Arkoun (*Rethinking Islam*, 35) between the Official Closed Corpus (OCC) or *musnaf* and the Quranic discourse or the Quran as it was recited. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Arkoun's work. Suffice to say that "Despite the obvious importance of the Quran and its exegesis throughout the Islamicate realm, Arkoun does not reflect on whether the Quran is 'rightly' considered to deliver a guideline for humankind. He rather engages with the question of how the Quran's language mechanisms have interacted with the demands and concerns of the interpretive communities..." (Völker, Katharina, 'Mohammad Arkoun's Study of the Quran' *SocArXiv* 20 Dec. [2019]) emphasizing on rationality than revelation. Thus, he has his detractors and his supporters.

¹² Toshihiko Izutsu, 'The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam.' In Mehdi Mohaghegh and Hermann Landolt (Eds.), *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* (McGill University: Montreal Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran Branch, 1971). 66.

Hence, the Quran and the *mushaf* are not at the same level. In hearing, it is in the nature of sound to spread and listening involves for the aural faculty, a dilation that induces an expansion of the whole psychic substance in receptivity. Sight, on the other hand, focuses and only concentrates itself upon the object of vision. In this sense, when reading the *mushaf*, one needs to transcend, to go beyond letters to see the ink and the 'Hand' that scribed—ultimately, to be aware of the Spirit itself.

*The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.*

(William Wordsworth)

The Language of the Arabs

Why Arabic? Because Muhammad was an Arab sent to the Arab people. Had the recitations not been in Arabic, they would not have been properly adapted to their intended audience. But this does not imply that it was necessarily 'composed' in Arabic from eternity on. Indeed, the majority of Muslims do not believe that the Quran's language is of this world. The Quran, the Word of God was brought down into the heart of the Prophet as meaning to be recited, heard and consequently, to be acted upon. It was first and foremost a Recitation, then only was the Divine Word embodied in the language of the Arabs. In this sense, language can be understood as having a divine origin. Using the analogy of the mirror and its image, just as the mirror-image is both the mirror and the object that it reflects, in the same way, when language is the mirror for word, the image is both the language and the word that it reflects.

Arabic is a Semitic language and has its own peculiarities that makes it ideal as the language of revelation—its system of verbal 'roots' and the myriad stem-forms derived from those roots. Every Arabic word can be traced back to a verbal root that has three consonants which in itself is 'dead' and 'unutterable' until it is vocalized by the vowels, and the placing of these vowels gives it its respective meanings.¹³ Extending the analogy of the earlier mirror-image, with the root letters as mirror and the words as images, letter-words are both letters and words that convey meanings.

¹³ Charles L. Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (State University of New York Press/ Islamic Texts Society, 1985). 74.

This process of tracing the meaning of a word back to its root is analogous to the search for essence. Though meanings can be disputed, the idea that language is impregnated with inherent meaning and significance is well-established. Because the Quran was revealed in Arabic, there are those who have sought access to spiritual experience through the medium of the Arabic language, as in calligraphy.¹⁴ In this sense, the Quran as the Word, can be experienced as a window upon Reality through the medium of language.

As letters without vowels are immobile, silent and 'dead', it is only through their 'vowelling' via the agency of breath that gives them motion, sound and 'life.' The absence of vowels allows the reader to actively *choose* the appropriate vowels, with different vowels giving rise to different meanings. Thus, from a single verbal root with three consonants sprouts an array of interwoven meanings. Though the derivatives may often appear to have quite different and contrary meanings and may result in words that on their surface seem not to be connected, there is a basic meaning that permeates all of them. This ambiguity entailed by the absence of written vowels ensured flexibility in its grammar; thus, diverse shades of meaning are always possible depending on contexts. This extraordinary richness of the language, however, is usually lost in translation.

As an example, the Arabic root for 'word' or 'utterance' (*kalim, kalam*) and 'wound' (*kalm, kulum*) consists of the same three consonants, k-l-m (ك ل م). They are related because both can educate and injure a person. So, just as words expose the meaning the speaker intends to convey, a gash or wound discloses what lies under the skin. But in the English translation, 'word' and 'wound' are two entirely different words that are not related to one another at all. Unless one knows the etymology of the language, the connection between the root and its derivatives is lost. In other words, when Adam was taught the Names (Q2:31), he was able to understand that everything that exists is from the one Being of God. He is the Cause of all being and acts. Every existent thing in the world is interconnected, entwined and entangled. While this entanglement is not obvious in the visible world, this is different in the realm of the

¹⁴ Meena Sharify-Funk, "Geometry of the Spirit": Sufism, Calligraphy, and Letter Mysticism. Available at <https://www.societyarts.org/geometry-of-the-spirit-sufism-calligraphy-and-letter-mysticism.html> [Accessed 12/11/2020]

Unseen. All things are derived from the One so there are relationships and meanings between them, for each has a unique role to play to complete the picture of oneness in the world.

The connection between the root and its derivatives, according to Abram,¹⁵ is similar with Hebrew, an even more ancient Semitic language, where

...the traditional Hebrew scribes refrained from creating distinct letters for the vowel-sounds to avoid making a visible representation of the invisible, for the mystery, whose very essence was invisible and hence unknowable—the sacred breath—has to remain ineffable.

Put differently, by inking a vowel-sound, it concretizes the infinite word of God to only one interpretation, limiting the multiple meanings and layers of the recital or text.

This is how the Quran, the Word of God descended onto the Prophet. Because it descended in the form of oracular verses or signs in Arabic, multiple meanings of the Word are possible, depending on the vowel-sounds placed between the consonants. This is as it should be for the Word of God is eternal, to be understood only by one who is wholly enveloped by Him.¹⁶

Al-Ghayb and the Understanding of Time and Space

Al-Ghayb, usually translated as ‘the unseen’ or ‘the invisible’ can also be understood as ‘the concealed.’ The concealed is contrasted with ‘*al-shabada*,’ ‘the visible’ or ‘the witnessed.’ The Quran (59:22) mentions these two worlds or presences; while God is ‘Knower of the unseen/absent and the witnessed,’ human beings know only the witnessed. Hence, faith (*īmān*) is needed for the ‘concealed.’ As for the ‘concealed,’

¹⁵ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). 144-145.

¹⁶ ‘The Quran is as a bride (*‘arūs*) who does not disclose her face to you, for all that you draw aside the veil. That you should examine it, and yet not attain happiness and unveiling (*kashf*) is due to the fact that the act of drawing aside the veil has itself repulsed and tricked you, so that the bride has shown herself to you as ugly, as if to say, “I am not that beauty.” The Quran is able to show itself in whatever form it pleases. But if you do not draw aside the veil and seek only its good pleasure, watering its sown field and attending on it afar, toiling upon that which pleases it best, it will show its face to you without your drawing aside the veil.’ (*Discourses of Rumi*. Trans. Arthur J. Arberry [London: John Murray, 1961] 236-237). In other words, the Quran will not open up its deeper meaning to anyone. Only a person with certain spiritual qualities is able to understand the fullness of God’s Word.

tradition differentiates between God, the Creator, and the spiritual world, His creation. Though 'concealed,' the goal is for people to perceive the unseen influences as spiritually present for it is from this hidden realm that everything flows into the witnessed world of the *dunyā*.

One cannot understand the worldview of the Quran without reference to the existence of this higher realm which is beyond the reach of human perception—consisting of everything that is hidden from Man's physical senses and awareness. Indeed, what makes a Muslim a *mu'min* is having faith in *al-Ghayb* (Q49:14), a factor emphasized at the beginning of the Quran (Q2:3). According to the Prophet, *'īmān* (faith) is to believe in Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Apostles, and the meeting with Him, and to believe in the Resurrection.¹⁷

Related to this is the fact that the human mind functions only on the basis of empirical perceptions and discursive logic.¹⁸ Because metaphysical ideas of religion relate to a realm beyond the reach of human perception or experience—*al-Ghayb*—hence to convey and grasp ideas that have no previous counterparts, the only possible way is by means of loan-images derived from man's own actual physical or mental experience; i.e., the Prophet had to make the verses understandable to his audience. This is why the Quran discerns between *āyat mubkamāt* (messages that are clear in and by themselves) and *mutashabih* (allegorical or symbolic). The latter, alluding to the realm of the *Ghayb*, cannot but be conveyed to man other than in allegorical terms for they could

¹⁷ Sahih Al-Bukhari, Book 2, *Hadith* 43.

¹⁸ There are two modes of knowing: transmitted (*naqlī*) knowledge and intellectual (*'aqlī*) knowledge, or between *'ilm* and *ma'rifa*—knowledge from outside and inside oneself. The former relates to everyday information and is easily understood, but the latter transcendent experiences can only be understood by the intellect or intelligence, not reason (see William C. Chittick, *Ibn al-'Arabī: The Doorway to an Intellectual Tradition*, available at <https://ibnarabisociety.org/doorway-to-an-intellectual-tradition-william-chittick/> [accessed 23/05/2021]). This also relates to the distinction made by S.H. Nasr ('The Meaning and Role of "Philosophy" in Islam.' *Studia Islamica* 37 (1973) 57-80), on "philosophy" as currently understood in the West in contrast to way it was initially understood by the early Muslim scholars. The former would understand philosophy to mean "...the attempt of man to reach ultimate knowledge of things through the use of his own rational and sensuous faculties and [to be] cut off completely from both the effusion of grace and the light of the Divine Intellect..." in contrast to philosophy as the gaining of certainty or the discovery of truth.

not be expressed otherwise.¹⁹ Due to the limitation of ordinary language, the only way to access the *Ghayb* or the Unseen levels of reality is to use the language of worldviews and religion—symbols, where a symbol is the reflection or shadow of a higher reality. As such, in contrast to *āyat muhkamat*, *āyat mutashabih* is opened to several levels of meaning and the key to unlocking them is via *ta'wīl*²⁰ (hermeneutics). *Ta'wīl* literally means “causing (something) to return (to its origin).” As the Word of God, the Quran is divine, so its meanings are fathomless (Q18:109, Q31:27). In this sense, just as *tanzil* literally means “causing (something) to descend,” *ta'wīl* is to take the Quran back through the many levels it has descended to its true meaning—its Divine origin. Indeed, it has been stated that Quranic verses have four meanings,

...the exoteric (*zābir*), the esoteric (*bāṭin*), the limit (*ḥadd*) and the divine project or point of ascent (*maṭla*). The exoteric is for oral recitation; the esoteric is for interior comprehension; the limit is the clear expression and the statutes of licit and illicit; the divine project is that which God intends to realise with humankind.²¹

Simnani concurs with these four levels of meaning and further matches them to corresponding realms of existence. The exoteric (*zābir*) level of the Quran relates to the ‘Human Realm’ (*‘ālam al-nāsūt*), the esoteric (*bāṭin*) level to the secrets of the ‘Realm of Sovereignty’ (*‘ālam al-malakūt*), the limit (*ḥadd*) of the Quran to the ‘Realm of Omnipotence’ (*‘ālam al-jabarūt*) and the point of ascent to the ‘Realm of Divinity’

¹⁹ This is the dilemma of ‘saying the unsayable’ or kataphasis (saying) and apophasis (unsaying) in ‘mystical theology’ (see Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* [US: University of Chicago Press, 1994]). Similarly Huston Smith (with Jeffery Paine, *Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine, An Autobiography* [US: HarperOne, 2009]) talks about the three worlds that differ in their structural levels of the organization of matter based on science: the microworld—the world of extremely small, not directly observable micro-objects; the macroworld—the world we live in and where we experience life, and knowledge is possible through direct perception with the help of human senses; and the megaworld—a world of enormous cosmic scales and speeds. Scientists used science’s technical language of mathematics to depict or articulate the two worlds that flanked our known world because ordinary language cannot do so.

²⁰ *Ta'wīl* is usually contrasted with *tafsīr*. While both imply “interpretation,” in later Islamic tradition the former is used to refer to the inner meaning of Quranic verses while the latter to the outward.

²¹ From Ali b. Abi Talib, see Jamal J. Elias, ‘Sufi *tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre,’ *Journal of Quranic Studies*, 12 (2010) 42.

(*'alam al-lābūt*).²² So, while the text is fixed, its meanings are variable and hierarchical, depending on one's state and maqam. That is why it is said that not anyone can be a spiritual hermeneut for he has first to experience the ascent himself.

Thus, just as writers have used allegory in all forms of art to illustrate or convey complex ideas and concepts in ways that are comprehensible or striking to its audience, the Quran uses allegories to convey and express its hidden or complex meanings of the 'unseen/concealed' through symbolic figures, actions, imagery or events as they can be grasped only intuitively as a general mental image. This is Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*²³ or the realm of the imaginal which is known only through the power or faculty of imagination, a mode of knowing between sense perception and pure intellection. 'Imagination' or the 'imaginal' realm or world is not 'imaginary,' for what is imaginary is the product of personal fantasy. To Corbin, this imaginal realm, whose "... place is neither of the sensory nor the intellectual world, but that of the intermediary 'eighth climate,' the world where the body is spiritualized, and the spiritual is embodied... In the absence of the imaginal world, we are reduced to mere allegory, for the active Imagination itself has been degraded to the status of producer of the imaginary"²⁴ Thus, the imaginal is a world that is ontologically as real as the visible world of the senses and the invisible world of the intellect, with its own faculty of perception.

For example, the Quran says that life in this *dunyā* is short compared to the hereafter. But it is significant because it is the place of sowing one's seeds whose fruits are to be reaped in the latter. Hence, whatever good or bad man does in the *dunyā* has consequences in the hereafter. To appeal to man's imagination, the consequences of his actions are

²² *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of 'Ala' Ad-Dawla As-Simnani*. Trans. Jamal J. Elias, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 108.

²³ The imaginal realm is also called the 'world of suspended images,' or the world of images. For Ibn Arabi, this in-between world is "The *barzakh*... the junction of the two seas (Q18:60): the sea of spiritual meanings and the sea of sensory objects. The sensory things cannot be meaning (*ma'na*), nor can the meanings be sensory. But the World of imagination, which we have called 'the junction of the two seas,' gives meaning corporeal shape and makes sensory objects into subtle realities" (William C. Chittick, "Eschatology," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Ed.) *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987] 391).

²⁴ Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*. Trans. Joseph Rowe (California: North Atlantic Books, 1998) 126.

portrayed by means of parables, allegories and metaphors, as depicted by the *āyat* of the Quran relating to heaven and hell. An *aya* depicting paradise says, 'For such as these, theirs shall be the Garden of Eden with rivers running below. Therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold, and shall wear green garments of fine silk and rich brocade, reclining upon couches. Blessed indeed is the reward, and how beautiful a resting place' (Q18:31); in contrast to a description of hell, and its torments, '...As for those who disbelieve, garments of fire shall be cut for them, and boiling liquid shall be poured over their heads, by which their innards and their skin will be melted. And for them shall be hooked iron rods. Whensoever they desire, in their grief, to leave it, they shall be returned unto it, while [being told], 'Taste the punishment of the burning!' (Q22:19-22). Both images portray the bliss of paradise and torment of hell as material or sensual pleasure and pain in order to depict inner states. These two categories of experience can only be illustrated via something man knows from his own outer experience. This is the meaning of the *āyat mutashabih* in the Quran.

Indeed, no one can really understand the Word of God, for He is the Infinite, the Ineffable, 'And none is like unto Him' (Q112:4). Likewise, His Word is also infinite and limitless (Q31:27). At the same time, the Quran proclaims, 'Truly your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then mounted the Throne' (Q7:54). The concepts of Time and Space are different from the vantage points of God and Man. The six days referred to is God's time and is not meant to be understood literally as six days of the 24 hour-period of Man's time. 'Mounted the Throne' is again allegorical, for He is the Formless and 'nought is like unto Him' (Q42:11). He is not limited in space or time for He is beyond space and time. This is the limitation of language due to the limitation of the human mind, for the finite can never understand the Infinite, so the Quran speaks only in metaphors.²⁵

The Concept of Time in the Quran

Tradition asserts that when the Absolute gives the Divine Command, *Kun!* (*Amr!*) from the realm of *al-Ghayb*, the universe unfolds and the Divine Names and Attributes manifest their traces. In this understand-

²⁵ From the Sufi point of view, God is the Absolute Beauty, the eternally Beautiful, and that is why their praises/glorifications of Him used the impassioned language of the lover.

ing, creation is the Self-Disclosure of God. It is the exteriorization of the Divine Principle, with each level unfolding hierarchically through successive levels. Each unfolding level reflects a higher level, and bears the divine traces from which all things originate. Hence, the universe and all that exist consist of traces—*āyat*—which then refer back to God. This is the cosmogonic unfolding of the universe starting with God, *al-Abad*—the Transcendent Unity (Unknowable in His Essence and is therefore not the subject of any knowledge). But He is also *al-Wabid*—immanent and inclusive, and encompasses all things. So, *al-Abad* and *al-Wabid* both connote oneness or unity, but its ontological intensity or mode of manifestation is subject to gradation. The former is absolute, infinite and total—*al-Dhat*, whereas the latter is relative and finite, differentiated—His Names and Attributes, *al-Sifat*. From *al-Wabid* the universe unfolds into subsequent levels (presences or worlds)—Spiritual, Imaginal, and Sensory and finally to the Perfect Man. This is known as *tanazzul* or the descent of Being, the particular manner the One Being of God manifests or makes Itself known through Five or Six Presences²⁶ from complete inwardness (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) through various degrees to outward manifestation (*‘ālam shabada*). The event occurs beyond Time or Space.

The Quran (7:172) says that all of humanity witnessed and affirmed God’s Lordship before his sojourn in the *dunyā*. There, in that pre-temporal time at *Alastu*, each was bathed in a brilliant divine light giving it its state at that moment. That state, according to Ibn Arabi, is in the category of the divine, ‘because it is God that gives it and it is His facing the things He brought into being. Then, because it is one essence, there is

²⁶ al-Qunawi, Ibn Arabi’s foremost disciple, did not include God’s Essence as a ‘Presence’ for it is beyond all entification. Hence, he reported only five presences. But, if the World of Divine Essence is included as the First presence, as done by Sa’id al-Din al-Farghani (William C. Chittick, ‘The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qunawi to al-Qayṣari.’ *The Muslim World* 72, 1982, 112-115) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (*Science and Civilization in Islam* [Chicago, Illinois: ABC International Group, Inc., 2001], 93-94), six presences are then reported. Further, if *al-Wabdab*, the Divine Solitude that stands ontologically between *al-Abad* and *al-Wabid* is added, seven presences can be counted. While there may be different interpretations of the Divine Presence, the overall scheme remains roughly the same. Check also *Fakhrudin Iraqi: Divine Flashes*, Translation and Introduction by W.C. Chittick & Peter Lamborn Wilson, Introduction (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, Inc., 1982, 3-32).

no thinking of more than it.' Winkel²⁷ interprets the last sentence to mean that the only thing Man sees is a single time period, with no sequence, i.e., there is no time. In other words, Man's perception is completely limited to the moment he is in—no past or future—that single state where there is no time. And, Man cannot transcend that single state or to step out of his moment, implying that he cannot not step out of existence and be independent of God, his Creator. This vision of time binds God and man together.

Thus, in the Muslim tradition, time is perceived as a series of predetermined events that bind divine power to the occurrence of each instant of a person's life span,²⁸ not the usual linear understanding of time as the 24 hour-period of the clock that seems to be unfolding. The Arabs have many terms for 'time' (such as '*dabr*'; '*asr*'; '*bin*'; '*dawam*'; '*mudda*'; '*waqt*'; '*an*'; '*yawm*'; '*saat*'; etc.—refer to Bowering), but for the purpose of this study, only the terms '*dabr*'; '*waqt*' and '*zamān*' are considered.

Continuing from Ibn Arabi that God is *Dabr*²⁹ or Time; so, just as God's Being is everlasting, so is His time—eternal, beginningless and endless. Man, created in the image of God,³⁰ is also understood as being time or *waqt*, but his time is only momentary, where 'each moment is the reflection of God's eternity in the person's receptivity to the divine action at each and every instant.'³¹ That is why, Man does not fully have the answer to what he is because at the moment he is only what he is right now, and at every moment of his existence, he is something new. So the self is the 'I' of the moment and each moment is new³² for it is

²⁷ Eric Winkel, 'Time is Not Real: Time in Ibn Arabi, and from Parmenides (and Heraclitus) to Julian Barbour.' *The Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*. Available at <https://ibnarabisociety.org/time%20is%20not%20real%20eric%20winkel/> [Accessed 20/4/2020]

²⁸ See Gerhard Bowering, 'The Concept of Time in Islam.' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141:1 (1997) 55-66.

²⁹ Abu Huraira reported: I heard Allah's Messenger as saying: Allah, the Exalted and Glorious, said: The son of Adam abuses *Dabr* (the Time), whereas I am *Dabr* since in My hand are the day and the night (Sahih Muslim, Book 27, Number 5580).

³⁰ Al-Ghazali commented on this *hadith* (God created Adam in His image) to mean that 'God showed beneficence to Adam. He gave him an abridged form that brings together every sort of thing found in the cosmos. It is as if Adam is everything in the cosmos, or an abridged transcription of the world' (*The Niche of Lights*. Trans. David Buchman, (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998) 31).

³¹ Bowering, 'The Concept of Time in Islam.' 61.

³² This is why 'The Sufi is the child of the moment,' i.e., he lives in the constant awareness that his self is nothing but what he is at the present moment. And because each moment is unique, each moment of the self is also unique.

God's constant and never-ending renewal of the self's creation.³³ In this perspective, 'time' is presence, and 'now' is a universe in itself.

So 'time' from the vantage point of God is eternal, while Man's 'time' is only a dot without duration. Within the human realm, however, that dot is experienced as time that seems to be unfolding in a linear manner as the 'arrow of time'³⁴ so that '... a term appointed may be fulfilled' (Q6:60) to complete its duration in the world. But, in the Divine realm everything is co-present, where the past, present and future are witnessed simultaneously. In the Divine realm, there is no Time.

According to Bowering,³⁵ to live in this world of forms, Man has to create a notion of time, '*zamān*,' that is imaginary and subjective, which can be explained by models of cosmology based on the Ptolemaic system of the universe as spheres as well as a God-man relation of time. So, there are three understanding of time: *dahr* is God's time—eternal and heavenly; *waqt* is human, *insān* or *anfusikum* time—a moment; and *zamān* is the physical linear time that enables Man to live in this world, the unfolding physical clock-time of the 24 hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year. *Waqt* is Man's vertical dimension of existence that binds him to the Creator, while *zamān* is his horizontal aspect that connects him with his fellow creatures.

This complexity of time has to be understood when reading the Quran, for its terrain is atemporal. For example, the Quran says, 'Truly your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days...' (Q7:54), where '*yawm*' is translated as a 'day'. In another verse, it says *yawm* is equated with 50,000 years (Q70:4), and yet another verse states a 'day' is like a thousand years (Q22:47). Thus 'day' here cannot be understood as the usual human linear time that we know of, for the event occurred beyond time. Another example can be seen in Surah *Kahf*, where physical time is contrasted with spiritual non-linear time.

³³ This is man's real self—that which God gives to him at each moment. And, because man lives in the process of God's everlasting renewal of the self, he subsists forever in His presence. See Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (UK: Oneworld Publication, 2008) 55-56.

³⁴ The arrow of time or time's arrow, is the concept positing the 'one-way direction' or 'asymmetry' of time, put forward by the astrophysicist Arthur Eddington in his book *The Nature of the Physical World* (1929 as part of the Gifford lectures). While at the microscopic level physical processes are believed to be time-symmetric, at the macroscopic level this is no longer the case for there is an obvious direction (or flow) of time.

³⁵ Bowering, 'The Concept of Time in Islam': 62.

The Companions/Sleepers of the Cave thought that they had slept only for a day or part of a day. Theirs was spiritual time, though it was 309 years of the physical clock time. Man experienced both times because he traversed both the physical and spiritual realms.

Time then is the link between the sempiternal Reality of the Transcendent Unity of God and the temporal experienced reality of the apparent multiplicity of the witnessed world.³⁶

Story-Telling in the Quran

Quranic story-telling is an act of shadowing or mirroring the ‘real’ connections between things/events. Like a picture of a neural network, where connections are very difficult to trace because of the sheer number of interconnections between the neurons, axons, dendrites and synapses, this is how things are related in reality—everything is enmeshed and entangled with one another, indicating the infinite complexity in God’s creations. In a way, it reflects the manner in which the Divine Names are made manifest in the world, and how their traces are interwoven, with subtle bonds that bind the universe together, but always referring back to its source—God.

Thus, when God tells a story, He unfolds the real threads that overlap like the warp and weft that weave the tapestry of existence. Take a Persian carpet: one sees its beautiful pattern on the outside; but it is the underside—the warp and weft—that weaves the pattern together, making the real connections of the forms of the patterns. Just as the warp and weft of the weaver’s carpet gives rise to the beautiful pattern seen on the top, the *‘alam al-ghayb* is the real world that provides the inner connections that gives rise to the witnessed world and which connects the two worlds (seen and the unseen). So, what the Quranic story mirrors then is reality itself, from God’s point of view, not a human reconstruction of it. That is why some mystics who have experienced the real world have difficulty describing it because the realities of the inner world transcend conventional language.³⁷

³⁶ Mohamed Haj Yousef, *Ibn ‘Arabi—Time and Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 2008). 30.

³⁷ John Renard refers to this intense experience of the *‘alam al-ghayb* as ‘beyond storytelling.’ Because words fail to express subtle aspects of spiritual experience, these can only be alluded to (see *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims*, (Los Angeles, US: University of California Press, 1996) 238.

The Quran exemplifies all those connections. So, when it tells a story, it is not a conventional recording of events. The Quranic narrative locates Man directly before the event itself, assuming his inner reality, very different from the way he is used to. Rather than a horizontal, linear unfolding of events, story-telling in the Quran includes not only a vertical dimension (between God and Man) but also a manifold horizontal view of the event (between Man and his fellow creatures). It is not a linear book. This is also the reason why Quranic story-telling mentions individual stories more than once; in each retelling, the version and perspective are different. To Neuwirth,³⁸ these can be seen as successive renderings that are rephrased and adapted based on the changing communal situation during the Prophet's time. It is in this respect that when the Quran is recited, one senses that behind the audible speech or sound there is a trace or hint of the unheard speech of the Other.

In addition, Quranic story-telling is not only telling stories of past events, but also that of the present and the future. Because God is beyond time and space, events that have happened are happening and will happen in the future. In that realm of the Unseen, the perspective is supratemporal.

Because the Quran descended onto, and through, the Prophet, he was the interpreter of the meaning of the stories. After his death, however, problems arose as to who was qualified to so interpret them. As 'Ali ibn Abi Talib pointed out to the Khawarij, the '... Quran is merely a scripture placed between two covers. It does not speak; it is merely men who speak through it.'³⁹ In other words, the unveiling of the meaning of its stories depends on the state and station of the person.

Prophet Muhammad

The Quran is a revelation that came through Muhammad but it was clearly not from him. Though he was known as *al-amīn* (the trustworthy), he was unlettered (*ummī* or 'the pure one'), a pure vessel for the Revelation, uncontaminated by the religious traditions of the time. The following excerpt from Nasr⁴⁰ clearly shows the centrality of the Prophet in Islam and of him being unlettered.

³⁸ 'Two Faces of the Quran,' 149.

³⁹ Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Quran: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 32.

⁴⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (ABC International Group, 2000) 32

The Word of God in Islam is the Quran; in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary; in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet. The Blessed Prophet must be unlettered for the same reason that the Virgin Mary must be virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted. The Divine Word can only be written on the pure and 'untouched' tablet of human receptivity. If this Word be in the form of flesh, the purity is symbolized by the virginity of the mother who gives birth to the Word, and if it be in the form of a book, this purity is symbolized by the unlettered nature of the person who is chosen to announce this Word among men. One could not with any logic reject the unlettered nature of the Prophet and in the same breath defend the virginity of Mary. Both symbolize a profound aspect of this mystery of revelation and once understood, one cannot be accepted and the other rejected.

Hence, the nature of the Prophet and that of the Virgin Mary are determined by the Quran as the Word of God and Christ. These two, the Prophet and the Virgin Mary, are the perfect revelation of God.

The unlettered nature of the Prophet demonstrates how the human recipient is completely passive before the Divine. Were this purity and virginity of the soul not to exist, the Divine Word would become, in a sense, tainted with purely human knowledge and not be presented to mankind in its pristine purity. The Prophet was purely passive in the face of the revelation he received from God. He added nothing to this revelation himself. He did not write a book but conveyed the Sacred Book to mankind.⁴¹

In other words, the Prophet said nothing on his own account. He was the perfect Messenger of God and the restitution of the Message received in accordance with God's Will—one charged with bringing the timeless news from the Unseen relating to the past, present or future.⁴² In receiving the Message, he revealed its Giver—the Origin. In giving the Message, he revealed the God to whom all return—the End. He was the perfect mirror through which the Divine Qualities were reflected onto this world. He was God's mirror and the place of manifestation of His Names and Qualities.

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, lived the Word. Indeed, he was the living Quran, sent as a mercy to the worlds and a witness to the unity of God. In His compassion to humanity, on the Night of Power, the

⁴¹ Ibid. 32

⁴² Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Quran: Semantics of the Quranic Weltanschauung*. (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, reprint. 2008, 2002), pp. 196-197

Trustworthy Spirit, speaking with the Voice of God, placed the Quran (as *ma'nā*) into the 'heart' of the Prophet. The source is God—*al-Mubdi'* (the Originator), *al-Khaliq* (the Creator), *al-'Alim* (the Knower of All)—speaking to humanity through the soul of Muhammad. Muhammad was the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the vehicle through which the Divine Word became crystallized in the world. As the Perfect Man, according to Ibn Arabi, 'He is on the divine form, namely, [the form of] the breath of the Merciful,'⁴³ alluding to the relation between divine and human speech, and the creative power that this relation implies.

There is then a subtle relationship between the Quran and the Prophet because the Word of God was transmitted through him to be uttered to those around him. He was not only the medium for the Word of God to humanity but also, in an archetypal sense, Its message. That is why it is said that the proper recitation of the Quran, the Message, transmits something of the soul of the Prophet, the Messenger, for he is the spirit of Islam. Whenever the words are chanted aloud to sound its music in one's ears, there is an incantatory, almost hypnotic quality that seems to reverberate in the air together with the Prophetic soul, which in some mysterious way reminds one of its original sonorous revelation. It is this relationship between the Quran and the Prophet that causes Muslims to feel his grace whenever they recite or read it.

Mubammad and Nuzul

Who exactly were Gabriel and the Prophet; what were their constitution? The Prophet, though known as the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), is still a mortal human, while Gabriel is an angel, a spirit, and a heavenly being. So, how did their meeting take place, and what was the 'common ground' that enabled the two to meet and to understand one another? In other words, how did the Word of God emanate from on High—the Infinite descent unto the Prophet, a finite being—via Gabriel? At the meeting point between Gabriel and the Prophet, what was transferred, and how was it transferred? What was the Prophet's state at that moment of transference when he became conscious of the Word of His Lord?

⁴³ Sara Sviri, 'KUN—The Existence-Bestowing Word in Islamic Mysticism: A Survey of Texts on the Creative Power of Language,' In S. La Porta and D. Shulman (Eds.), *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 57.

It was during one of the Prophet's retreats in a cave on Jabal al-Nur near Mecca, when he was about 40 years of age, that he first received the revelation in the month of Ramadan. The process of revelation continued for the next 23 years and ended shortly before his death in 632. At the first revelation, Gabriel came to the Prophet and commanded him to read/recite (*Iqra!*⁴⁴), and he responded that he was not a reciter. Gabriel hugged him tightly so much so that he thought he was going to die and repeated the command, and the Prophet gave the same response.⁴⁵ Only after the third embrace was he able to utter, '*Iqra...*' (Q96:1-5). The Prophet, in his narration of the event after Gabriel had left him, said to his Companions, 'It was as though these words were written on my heart.'⁴⁶ So, what exactly took place?

These two—Gabriel and the Prophet—were of different constitutions. Gabriel is an angel, made of light—the light that is 'the immediate radiance of Light or Being.'⁴⁷ He is a subtle, spiritual, unseen being from the '*ālam al-Ghayb* synonymous with 'life and life-giving,' and is known as the 'Trustworthy Spirit' (*Rūh al-Amīn*, Q26:192-193). As the angel of revelation, he is faithful in conveying the Word of God to the Prophet.

Muhammad, on the other hand, is a man, 'neither soul nor body...

⁴⁴ The term "*Iqra!*" evokes a more complex meaning than the usual translation of "read." In fact, *Iqra* implies the notion of recitation in terms of an embodied consciousness of what one is reading. See Dario Tomasello, 'An Unexpected Imagery: The Heart's Vision and Other Synesthetic Functions of the *Dbiker* into the Islamic Tradition.' *Cinema* 9 (2017) 27-39.

⁴⁵ 'He came to me,' said the apostle of God, 'while I was asleep, with a coverlet of brocade whereon was some writing, and said, "Read!" I said, "What shall I read?" He pressed me so tightly that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said, "Read!" I said, "What shall I read?" He pressed me with it the third time so that I thought it was death and said "Read!" I said, "What then shall I read?"—and this time I said only to deliver myself from him, lest he should do the same to me again. He said:

Read in the name of thy Lord who created,
Who created man of blood coagulated.
Read! Thy Lord is the most beneficent,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught that which they knew not unto men.

So I read and he departed from me.' Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Mubammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Introduction and Notes A. Guillaume (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1967) 106.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 106.

⁴⁷ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989) 13.

but a third entity constituted out of the two.⁴⁸ Al-Attas explains that these entities—soul and body—predate the creation of man; the former relates to the articulate soul or the soul of the Covenant (Q7:172) before its attachment to the body, while the latter denotes the foetus that is similar to other animals before God breathes His Spirit into it (*Nafas al-Rahmān*, Q15:28-29; Q38:71-72). This spirit that is breathed into the foetus (the articulate soul) elevates its state of being to the new creation (*kbalqan ākbāra*) called ‘man.’⁴⁹ This in-breathing of His Spirit also entangles Man with God through the recognition and consciousness of God as his Source of being. Hence, in this world of the *dunyā*, Man exists as a single being, having a dual nature, at once body (or *basbar*) and soul (or *nafs*)⁵⁰. It is Man as *insān*⁵¹ that remembers his Covenant with God for at its core lies the spirit. The body or *basbar* is not able to do so due to its darkness (clay). *Basbar* comes into existence only in the *dunyā*, as a mount for the *insān* to go through its earthly journey. Hence, the Quranic verse speaks of the Prophet, ‘Say, ‘I am only a man like you...’ (Q18:110, Q41:6). But, of course, he was no ordinary man for his soul had been readied for the descent of the Quran;⁵² his being had been illuminated by the light of God and alchemically transformed from an ordinary stone into a precious one.

⁴⁸ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Sūrah Al-Nisā’ (4):58 and Sūrah Al-Mu’minūn (23):12-14* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015) 35.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 35-36.

⁵⁰ God created Man as a single entity that consists of a physical body (from the dust of this world) that is visible with the outward eye and then breathing of His Spirit into the body (Q15:29). This divine act of inbreathing results in the *nafs* (usually translated as self or soul)—the essence of who one is, which can be seen as a metaphor for God endowing Man with life and consciousness. The higher dimension of the inward human reality is the *ruh* while the lower dimension is the *nafs*. The former is the origin, while the heart and soul came into being only after the attachment of the spirit to the bodily frame (Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God’s Bondsmen from Origin to Return*. Trans. Hamid Algar [New York: Caravan Books Delmar, 1982] 334-335). In addition, Najm al-Din Kubra writes on the soul, heart and spirit, “Soul, heart, and spirit give expressions to a single thing. However, soul is used when that thing is defiled and hardened, heart when it becomes purified, and spirit when it gains nearness to God...” (see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1992] 298).

⁵¹ The word ‘*insān*’ is Arabic for human being. *Insān*, according to linguists, has two roots; the first is ‘*nīsyān*’ means ‘to forget,’ while the second ‘*unsīyah*’ means ‘intimacy, to love, to be loved, to become close, to relate.’ The Quran uses *insān* to refer to human beings when non-physical features and qualities are intended. In other words, *insān* refers to the inward or subtle dimension of human beings.

⁵² Tarif Khalidi (*The Quran: A New Translation*, US: Penguin Classics, 2008) writes that ‘... at various stages of his life divine beings descended and cleansed his heart of its “black spot”...’ (xv).

The first revelation then was an encounter between the eternity of the Divine Word and the ephemeral speech of creatures. Allah is the Most High, the Ineffable, the Unknowable, the Transcendent, and no words can describe nor praise Him except what He has spoken of Himself in the Quran. No letters, no symbols, can depict Him; He is as He has spoken of Himself in the Quran; in His Mercy to mankind, He sent Gabriel to convey His Word to the Prophet. While Gabriel is pure spirit or light, the Prophet is both light and darkness. So, for the two to meet, they have to come halfway, to a horizon of meeting; Gabriel had to descend from the higher realm of *al-Ghayb* while the Prophet had to ascend from the lower world of the *dunyā*. Or to put it differently, Gabriel became a spirit corporealized, while the Prophet became a body spiritualized (he ‘died’ to this world leaving the darkness of the *basbar*), and they met within the sacred or the imaginal space, an ontological realm mediating between the invisible and visible. That state of in-betweenness continuously ‘transforms existence into non-existence and non-existence to existence, creates and absorbs the world as representation, and eventually makes the soul conscious of its being,’⁵³ Gabriel ‘infused’ the Word of God into the Prophet. The event took place in one moment, like a flash of lightning.⁵⁴ This is why it is believed that the Quran descended as a whole into the heart of the Prophet in that one moment—when the Prophet ascended from his *waqt* time to *Dabr’s* eternal time—becoming articulated over the next 23 years as and when required by the events in his life.

Ibn Khaldun⁵⁵ elaborates on this encounter as follows. According to him, the prophetic soul

...is by nature suited to exchange humanity altogether, both corporeal and spiritual humanity, for angelicity of the highest stage, so that it may actually become an angel in a flash of a moment, glimpse the highest group within their own stage, and listen to essential speech and divine address during that moment...God implanted and formed in them the natural ability to slough off humanity in that moment which is the state of revelation. God freed them

⁵³ See Hooman Koliji, *In-Between: Architectural Drawing and Imaginative Knowledge in Islamic and Western Traditions* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016) 32.

⁵⁴ For this reason, it is called *wahy* (or revelation), because the root *why* has the meaning “to hasten” (see Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimab: An Introduction to History*. Trans. Franz Rosenthal [New Jersey, US: Princeton University Press, 1967] Vol.1, 200).

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 199-200.

from the lets and hindrances of the body, by which they were afflicted as human beings...

Revelation, then, implies leaving one's humanity, in order to attain angelic perceptions and to hear the speech of the soul.

The result of this encounter is an alchemical reaction of turning the Ineffable and Inexpressible eternal Word of God that is beyond time and space, into a reality of this temporal world. Three times Gabriel hugged the Prophet tightly. Each hug can be seen as a symbol of union—for the soul of the Prophet had yet to arrive at the meaning of the Word of God. So his response, 'I am not a reciter' denotes the difficulty in communicating the eternal Word and the Divine speech through a human language. Gabriel hugs him three times before his soul opens up to the knowledge⁵⁶ of the Unseen—for the meaning of the Word of God to be made manifest in his heart so that he could recite it. In that embrace, Gabriel strengthens the Prophet's heart⁵⁷ enabling him to understand and retain the meaning of the 'speech' he has heard (Q26:192-195). Put differently, the angelic embrace signifies the entanglement of the Prophet with the Word of God. Metaphorically, Muhammad receives the 'inkpot' or the Quran in its entirety which he inks or vocalizes over the next 23 years at the promptings of Gabriel based on the circumstances of his life. At that moment, the Prophet had reached the highest point predestined for him, a point at which he is so close to God that there was left only the distance of two bows' length or less (Q53:9) between them, metaphorically. As he received the love of God, he 'died' to this world, becoming totally effaced in what Ibn Arabi called 'a station of no station.'⁵⁸

The experience, from one point of view, is synesthetic, such as where the sound heard triggers also the other senses, notably vision. Indeed,

⁵⁶ Knowledge is the arrival of meaning in the soul (*busul*) and the soul's arrival at meaning (*wusul*).

⁵⁷ For Al-Ghazali, the heart or *qalb* as a divine subtle reality is the essence of the human being. It is the seat of understanding and knowledge upon which the faculties of the soul depend. Because its nature is such that it is always in a constant state of vacillation, it is seen as a more suitable mode of knowing the infinite self-disclosures of God than reason. See Mehmet Yavuz Seker, *A Map of the Divine Subtle Faculty: The Concept of Qalb (Heart) in Classical and Contemporary Islamic Scholarship* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian Catholic University, 2012), 34. Available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/74300834.pdf> [Accessed 12/3/2018], 34).

⁵⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 375-379.

this understanding was reinforced by what occurred next: when the Prophet, half-way down the mountain after the overwhelming experience in the cave, out of sheer desperation that he might have become a jinn-inspired poet or a man possessed, heard a voice above him, saying that he (Muhammad) was the Apostle of God and that he (the voice) was Gabriel. Looking heavenward, the Prophet saw Gabriel in his full form across the horizon and was transfixed, 'I stood gazing at him, moving neither forward nor backward; then I began to turn my face away from him, but towards whatever region of the sky I looked, I saw him as before. And I continued standing there, neither advancing nor turning back... until he parted from me.'⁵⁹ Here, the Prophet was awed by a vivid and overpowering 'vision' of a divine being who filled the horizon. That gaze was more than ordinary sight—it was mystical 'seeing.'⁶⁰ Thus, the initial encounter in the cave was further strengthened by this vision in some sort of synesthetic function to amplify the power of the first revelation.

Indeed, as Muhammad said to his Companions, 'Truly, I see what you do not see, and I hear what you do not hear,' and 'If you knew what I know, you would laugh little and weep much.'⁶¹ In an example of this synesthetic 'seeing,' it was reported that once when he was reciting Surah *as-Saffat* to a delegation from the Hadhramaut who had come to him to know more about Islam, he could not get past the fifth verse as tears flowed down his beard. When asked, he responded, 'My fear of Him makes me weep. He has sent me on a straight path that is like the edge of a knife. If I were to stray from it I would be destroyed.'⁶² The Prophet 'saw' and ontologically experienced what he was reciting.

The Prophet suffered much each time revelation came to him because

⁵⁹ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 106.

⁶⁰ In the Middle Ages, images had to be tied to the truth. Otherwise, they were considered idols, which are always dangerous and, therefore, banned. Here, sight was not simply one of five senses. It was a physical encounter, a point of contact between rays sent from both the viewing eye and the viewed object. If sight entails contact, seeing is a complex, concrete action which involves all the senses of the body (touch, smell, hearing, taste) at the same time (synaesthetically). Seeing, in other words, is an action which demands internal discipline, a posture of the mind as well as of the body, and an intentional gaze which generates a particular perspective. Seeing means, therefore, coming into contact with an image and activating it; to put it more eloquently, it means taking part in a 'stage of the senses,' formed of actions and relationships. Seeing is a performance' (Carla Maria Bino, 'Images and Performative Vision in the Middle Ages,' *Eikón Imago* 11:1 (2017) 71.

⁶¹ Kermani, *God is Beautiful*. 263.

⁶² *Ibid.* 262.

he had to 'leave' his bodily self '...to attain angelic perceptions and to be able to hear the speech of the soul. This causes pain, since it means that an essence leaves its own essence and exchanges its own stage for the ultimate stage (of the angels).'⁶³ Indeed, the Prophet described what was occurring: 'No revelation takes place without making me think my soul is being torn from me.'⁶⁴ Over time and with repeated revelation, the pain lessened. After the initial experience of revelation, the Prophet no longer lived in this world in the normal sense of the word for he had passed beyond the veil that separated him from Divine Unity. To him, this world and the next became one, and in this state, he was merely the voice for metaphysical self-presence; it is no longer Muhammad, the man, who is speaking.

From this perspective of *Nuzul al-Quran*, an ordinary person can and should aspire to experience the Prophetic reception of the Word. When reciting the Quran, one has to allow the Word to go through oneself, to let it resonate within one's heart and soul (the simultaneous occurrence of *busul* and *wusul*) so as to obtain a glimpse of the knowledge or awareness of Him. In other words, to experience *nuzul*, man has to raise his level of consciousness or aspire to ascend like the Prophet. This is possible because man has been infused with the *Nafas al-Rahmān* or the Breath of God (Q38:72), that is, with consciousness of God and with the awareness thereby of human contingency in sight of the Divine, and of man's relationality to Him, as part of a whole, *tawhīd*. This transformative aspect can be seen in the many conversion stories of the early Islamic era, where Arabs converted upon hearing the recitation of the Quran. Here, the meaning of the recital was clearly implanted into their hearts so that they not only hear but see what was recited with their whole being.

The Quran and Its Message

What is the message of the Quran conveyed to the Prophet? The message is simple: to lift Man out of darkness into light; to remind him of what he has forgotten; of who he is, his essential reality going back to the Covenant of *Alast* (Q7:172)—the pact that he had made with God before his descent into this world of forms. So, who is Man? To know who

⁶³ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*. 201.

⁶⁴ That is, with each revelation he died to his lower self. Kermani, 263.

Man is, one has to start not with this world but a pre-temporal world. Verse 172, Surah *Al-Araf* is the foundation of Islamic sacred history for it sets the relationship between God and humanity at the moment of pre-temporal creation. This event, known as the Covenant of *Alast* is a pre-temporal covenant made by God with all of humanity prior to their earthly existence. Once each soul descends and become embodied in the *dunyā*, it is veiled from the Unseen, immerses itself in the world of distractions and forgets its covenant. Though the soul is still divine in origin and remembers its Lord, because that transcendent realm is in a sense hidden, humanity needs to be reminded of its real nature.

The Covenant verse (Q7:172) also emphasizes the primordial nature with which all human beings were originally endowed—the *fitrah* (Q30:30),⁶⁵ implied by the innate recognition of God's Oneness which constitutes the essence of being human. According to Ibn al-Arabi, the 'primordial human disposition' is the sum of the attributes of perfection possessed by the human spirit at its creation.⁶⁶ Human beings were created with an original disposition that allows them to understand things as they truly are. But, because this disposition has been occluded, they have to be reminded of that original disposition. In other words, revelation and prophecy serve as reminders and renewals of their initial covenant with God.⁶⁷ That is why it is said of the Prophet that he is a light and a mercy sent to mankind.

As stated by Jami,⁶⁸ 'Man, in regard to his corporeal nature, stands at the lowest point of degradation; nevertheless, in regard to his spiritual nature, he is at the summit of nobility.' He is both body and spirit, a

⁶⁵ *Fitrah* means religion, and is referred to as 'primordial' because human beings were originally created for religion ('I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me.' Q51:56).

⁶⁶ Or in the words of Najm al-Din Razi (1982), 'Know that man in truth is the mirror of the essence and attributes of God. When the mirror is purified, God becomes manifest in it with whatever attribute He chooses. Whatever attribute is apparent in the mirror derives from the source of the manifestation and does not belong to the mirror as such; all that belongs to the mirror, once purified, is the capacity to reflect. The secret of man's vice-regency is this, that he is the means and the instrument for the manifestation of God's essence and attributes.' (316)

⁶⁷ See Joseph E. B. Lumbard, 'The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions.' In Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard & Mohammed Rustom (Eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (US: HarperOne, 2015) 1770.

⁶⁸ Nuruddin Abdur Rahman Jami, *Lawaib: A Treatise on Sufism*. Trans. E. H. Whinfield and Mirza Muhammad Kazvini (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1906). 23.

creature of this world and the higher spiritual world (*al-ghayb*). Or in the words of Ibn Arabi, 'Man is a copy (*nuskha*) of both the realities of the Divine Names and the cosmic realities'⁶⁹—his body is a copy of the cosmic realities, but his spirit is the image of the Divine Names. While the body degrades at death, the spirit—his essence—is destined to return to its origin, for though he lives his life in this world, he is *not* of this world.

Razi⁷⁰ outlines the five states that man undergoes: (i) non-being, (ii) being in the world of spirits, (iii) attachment of the spirit to the bodily frame, (iv) separation of the spirit from the bodily frame, and finally, (v) the return of the spirit to the frame. In allegorical terms, Man's original nature is 'light' but when he is engrossed in the *dunyā*, the darkness of this world of matter overwhelms him and the 'light' is occluded. The revelation is meant to remind him that his heart is a 'polished mirror' which has to be cleansed of the dust that has gathered upon it so that it can once again reflect the 'light.'⁷¹ Only then can he return to God with a sound heart (*qalb salim*) and a content soul. Thus, the Quran offers Man a complete guidance towards the good life and spiritual fulfilment in this world as well as contentment in the Hereafter.

Conclusion

Nuzul al-Quran can be seen as an event when the Prophetic consciousness or awareness was elevated to its highest point; in this ascent, the Prophet's soul returned to its primordial nature—the *rūh*—enabling the finite to communicate with the Infinite. His soul became spiritual through freeing itself from bodily matters and corporeal perceptions. It is only in this state that the Prophet was able to receive the revelation. The event of the revelation occurred in one moment beyond space and time; God, through the agency of Gabriel, revealed to the Prophet's heart the full Quran which became unfolded over the next 23 years of his life.

Nuzul al-Quran also can be seen as the Prophetic journey of surren-

⁶⁹ See Souad Hakim, (2003). Unity of Being in Ibn 'Arabi - A humanist perspective. *The Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*. Available at <https://ibnarabisociety.org/unity-of-being-in-ibn-arabi-souad-hakim/> [Accessed 12/3/2020].

⁷⁰ Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return*. Trans. Hamid Algar. (New York: Caravan Books Delmar, 1982) 387-391.

⁷¹ Shihabuddin Yahaya Suhrawardi, *The Shape of Light: Hayakal Al-Nur*. Trans. Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti (US: Fons Vitae, 1998) 9.

der—from submission to complete surrender to God's Will and Decree over 23 years, from being an *insān nafsān* to becoming an *insān kamil*, via a series of meeting points with Gabriel within the imaginal world. Through this journey he moved from the horizontal level of existence of this world to the vertical realm of *al-Ghayb* (Q6:162-163).

The event is significant for Muslims as the Quran, being the Word of God, is the basis of everything that Man needs to know to guide him in this *dunyā*. It is God's final revelation to Man, guiding him out of a state of ignorance to knowledge. It is the Speech that gives life, reviving a dead soul through divine knowledge, the consciousness (*taqwā*) that He is the source of all existence. The Quran as God's Living Word is a mercy and a light from Him, emanating from His immense compassion and love for Man, the best of His creations. In this sense, the Quran can be seen as a mirror that reflects His Word through the archetypes of the Divine Names—'Our signs in the universe and within themselves...' (Q41:53); so too, Man (*al-insān al-kamil*) is a mirror of God and the cosmic names.

The Prophet, as the conduit between God and His creatures, is the 'living Quran'. He is the embodiment of Divine Compassion, sent as a mercy for all the worlds. Indeed, 'his character was the Quran,'⁷² meaning that the reality and the secrets of God's *āyats* are within the heart of the Prophet—as the entanglement of matter and meaning. That is why God said of the Prophet, 'And truly thou art of an exalted character' (Q68:4). So, the Prophet is the voice, model, herald and representative of Divine Mercy, man's guide to God, the messenger of His message, the conveyer of the Quran. This is why the *Shabada* has two parts; the first part 'There is no god but Allah' is followed by 'and Muhammad is the messenger of God.' This 'and' is a crucial link between the two parts, for it declares that faith in God leads not only to faith in His Prophet, but it also states how the One God relates to humanity.⁷³ God calls Muhammad His 'beloved,' where the meaning of love is nothing other than conformity or going back to one's original state—the *fitrah*. It is the recognition that God created man in His own "form" and imbued

⁷² Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 746

⁷³ The first statement describes the nature of reality, the essential Unity of God as the sole deity—the truth that man has to conform. The second illustrates God's essential Mercy, identifying Muhammad as the bearer of Divine guidance (right activity—*islām* and right faith—*īmān*) for the Islamic community (see Peter Samsel, 'The Shahadah as Truth and as Way.' *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 9:2 (2003) 77-114.

him with His Beautiful Names because He loves beauty and “Who made beautiful all that He created, and Who began the creation of man from clay” (Q32:7). In other words, this is the recognition of Allah as the possessor of the Most Beautiful Names, as Love. Indeed, the universe was created out of His Love to be recognized, with Muhammad fulfilling this role in the most perfect manner.

In this world, Man is to interpret the meanings of the Names that are inscribed in his being. The practice of *dhikr* or invoking the Most Beautiful Names of God is the means of remembering Him. Since these Names are already in Man, though in potentiality, in *dhikr* he actualizes them, making his remembrance of God at once God’s remembrance of him. In this remembrance and recognition of what he has forgotten, he rids himself of his amnesia. Hence, he follows the Prophet on his *mi’rāj* to recover his own primordial self.

The message of the Quran, in the words of Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbi⁷⁴: ‘...is the invitation of people to the worship of Allah, and entrance into His *deen*’ (p. 9); it is an invitation to enter into a metaphysical relationship with Him, a bargain in which one can bargain all that one is not for everything that one truly is. That is why Muslims are asked to follow the Prophet for the love of God: ‘Say, ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins. And God is Forgiving, Merciful’ (Q3:31).

⁷⁴ Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbi, *The Sciences of Tafsiir*. Trans. *Kitab at-Tashil li ‘Ulum at-Tanzil*. 9. Available at <http://www.bogvaerker.dk/Bookwright/Sciences.pdf>. [Accessed 20/7/2020].