

The Voice of Revelation in the Conversation of Mankind

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Psalm 19 begins, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork.”¹ These words may do a number of things—they may convey their author’s sense of awe and wonder, they may portray the beauty and unlimited horizons of the night sky—but chief among the various things these few words do is make an epistemological claim: There is a God, and we can (at least in part) know something about him. There is a long tradition that sees “the creation” as a general revelation to all of mankind.² Isaac Newton’s belief that his research confirmed the existence of God is a reflection of this view: “Whence arises all that order and beauty which we see in the world? . . . Does it not appear from phenomena that there is a being incorporeal, living, intelligent?”³ Such revelation should be accessible to all simultaneously, uneducated as well as educated, regardless of station in life or cultural history, and therefore should provide a foundation for the unity of mankind. This might indeed be the case if all men saw “the Creation” when they looked at the

¹ Psalm 19: 1. Unless otherwise noted, all Old Testament quotations are from the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH translation as printed in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Paul makes a similar but stronger claim: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1: 20). Unless otherwise noted, all New Testament quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* as printed in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985). All biblical references will be cited by book, chapter, and verse(s) and hereafter will be parenthetically inserted into the text.

² Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), pp. 59-77.

³ Isaac Newton, *Optics*, 3rd ed. (London, 1721), p. 344, as quoted in Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 288. This line of argument appears to be good enough for God when he finally responds to Job’s cry for a hearing and for justice (see Job 38: 1-42: 6 for God’s argument and Job’s chastened response).

world around them, but is far less likely if some see “Nature, red in tooth and claw”⁴ when they observe the world. Even if everyone saw the world as creation, however, individuals still might come to different conclusions about God and the goodness of his creation depending on whether one was looking up at the sky from a burning desert, a windswept icepack, or a beach on a semitropical island. Such general revelation is related to the field of natural theology, which attempts to understand God and his works on the basis of the physically observable and within the limits of unaided human reason.⁵ While I will not pursue the idea of general revelation in this paper, one should keep in mind that the more directed revelation which will be the focus of this paper shares with general revelation an epistemological component—a claim to knowledge.

Revelation, in the sense of God or God’s messenger transmitting information or instructions directly to man, is not argued for in the Hebrew scriptures, but is assumed as a reality of life. Old Testament revelation takes many forms, and may come “through theophanies, through angels, through dreams, through oracles (such as Urim and Thummin), through visions and locutions, through natural phenomena and through historical events, through wonderful guidance given to human beings, and through the words and deeds of the Prophets.”⁶ A similar understanding undergirds the New Testament, which is, from a Christian perspective, the

⁴ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam A. H. H.” in *Tennyson’s Poetry*, Robert W. Hill, Jr., ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, “A Norton Critical Edition,” 1971), p. 148.

⁵ Within the Christian tradition, many evangelical Protestants distinguish between general revelation and the “special revelation” found only in the Bible (see Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959]), while many Catholics make a distinction between natural and revealed religion (see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* [New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983], pp. 175-179).

⁶ Brunner, p. 21.

continuation and completion of the Hebrew Bible: “the New Testament understands . . . Jesus Christ . . . as the final self-manifestation of God, . . . but also the witness given to Him by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers, the proclamation of Christ by His chosen Apostles . . .”⁷ Emil Brunner maintains that this revelation continues “through the believing community, and finally [to] the fixing of this witness in written form in the Bible of the Old and New Testaments.” He concludes, “Holy Scripture therefore does not only speak of the revelation; it is itself the revelation.”

The biblical religions of Judaism and Christianity are not alone in claiming divine revelation as their foundation, of course. Perhaps even more forcefully than does the Bible, The Qur’an proclaims itself to have been delivered in pure form from Allah to Muhammad his prophet.⁸ And, beyond Muslims and “People of the Book,”⁹ Keith Ward argues that other “scriptural traditions” also offer some sense of revelation.¹⁰ Ward also maintains that revelation is important in primitive religions.¹¹ All of this is merely to observe that the notion of revelation seems to appear wherever religious beliefs and practices appear, and thus it is a widespread, if not universal, foundation for and influence on belief and action.

This paper will not attempt to explicate the differences in the meaning of “revelation” or the specific revelations found in various traditions, nor will it attempt to adjudicate the truth of claims to revelation so far identified. Rather the goal of this paper will be to understand how claims to divine revelation enter into

⁷ Emil Brunner, 21.

⁸ See Sura 2.97 and Sura 53.5-10.

⁹ Those who accept the Bible as revelation, Jews and Christians (see The Qur’an, Sura 3.64-80).

¹⁰ Ward, pp. 134-156 for a discussion of Hinduism, and pp. 156-173 for a discussion of Buddhism.

¹¹ Ward begins his investigation of revelation with a consideration of the “primal disclosures” in primitive religions around the world, pp. 50-87.

what Michael Oakeshott called “the conversation of mankind.”¹² I should also note that, except incidentally to my primary purpose, I will neither explicate nor evaluate Oakeshott in this paper.

I: JEREMIAH

I will take as a point of entry into the topic of revelation the account of Jeremiah, one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. The book of Jeremiah begins with a statement of its content and a note about its context: “The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the LORD came to him in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of the reign, and throughout the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month” (Jeremiah 1: 1-3). These verses situate Jeremiah personally (his family and occupation), geographically (Anathoth was a small town less than four miles north of Jerusalem¹³), chronologically (ca. 626—587 BCE¹⁴), and in terms of the political environment (the conquest of Judah by Babylon and forced exile¹⁵).

¹² Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind,” in *What is History? and other essays*, Luke O’Sullivan, ed. (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2004), pp. 187-199, and “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), pp. 488-541, esp. 488-495.

¹³ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 73, 113.

¹⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, “Harper Torchbooks,” 1969), v. I, p. 103. Thomas W. Overholt, “Jeremiah,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 601.

¹⁵ See Heschel pp. 130-139 for an overview of the political history of Jeremiah’s prophetic period.

This matter-of-fact documentary opening suggests that the claim that “the word of the Lord” has come to a prophet is an idea already well known to the book’s readers or hearers. In fact, one of the things clearly shown in the Book of Jeremiah is that Judah is a land of many prophets proclaiming “the word of the Lord.” If that is the case, why should anyone listen to Jeremiah when there are so many others one can listen to? Jeremiah must capture the attention of the people of Judah if his voice is to be heard¹⁶ and his message heeded in a cacophony of conflicting claims, so immediately after the third person introduction Jeremiah himself presents his credentials.

The word of the LORD came to me:

Before I created you in the womb, I selected you;
Before you were born, I consecrated you;
I appointed you as a prophet concerning the
nations.

I replied:
Ah, LORD GOD!
I don’t know how to speak,
I am still a boy.
And the LORD said to me:
Do not say, “I am still a boy,”
But go wherever I send you
And speak whatever I command you.
Have no fear of them,
For I am with you to deliver you
–declares the LORD.

¹⁶ To assist Jeremiah in capturing the ear of the people and rulers, not only does God give him the precise words to say but God also instructs him to perform public acts which will catch the eye and symbolize God’s message (see “Jeremiah’s Symbolic Actions” in Overholt, pp. 625-627). Among these are 1) hiding a linen belt (13: 1-11), 2) refraining from marriage, mourning rites, and feasting (16: 1-9), 3) breaking a ceramic pot (19: 1-13), 4) carrying a cup of wine of God’s wrath for various people to drink (25: 15-29) 5) wearing a yoke (27: 1-22), 6) buying a field in his hometown and protecting the deed (32: 6-15), 7) setting wine before the Rechabites (35: 1-19), and 8) sending a book to Babylon with instructions that it be read along and then destroyed (51: 59-64). Jeremiah was a performance artist who knew how to attract a crowd.

The LORD put out His hand and touched my mouth,
and the LORD said to me: Herewith I put My words into
your mouth.

See, I appoint you this day
Over nations and kingdoms:
To uproot and to pull down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant.

(Jeremiah 1: 4-10)

The message that God instructed Jeremiah to deliver is not one designed to make either the people or the rulers of Judah happy: because the people have shown their wickedness by forsaking God and worshipping other gods and idols, “disaster [shall] break loose upon all the inhabitants of the land!” and God will call the kingdoms to the north to conquer Judah and Jerusalem (1: 14-16).

The reception of Jeremiah on the part of the people and rulers of Judah, and others that God sends him to, proves to be mixed. In some cases he is heeded, in others jeered (5:12-13), in others threatened with bodily harm or execution (see 18: 18-23 and 26: 7-19). Throughout the biblical account Jeremiah encounters and comments on other prophets, or at least individuals who claim to be prophets. Chapter 23 features God’s denunciation of “godless” priests and prophets (vv. 11-12) and strictures against false prophets and dreams (vv. 13-39). The gist of the message of these “false prophets” is that God will bring the exiles back to Judah and that peace is at hand. This message clearly conflicts with the one which Jeremiah delivered, a warning message of judgment and punishment (famine, war, death) for having deserted the one true God who lead Israel from bondage in Egypt, and recalls

the promises¹⁷ of God's covenant with Israel: "you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples" (Exodus 19: 5) and "I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone" (Leviticus 26: 6).

Jeremiah delivers God's instructions to the people to ignore these false prophets:

Thus said the LORD of Hosts:
Do not listen to the words of the prophets
Who prophesy to you.
They are deluding you,
The prophecies they speak are from their own
minds,
Not from the mouth of the LORD.
They declare to men who despise Me:
The LORD has said:
"All shall be well with you";
And to all who follow their willful hearts they say:
"No evil shall befall you."
But he who has stood in the council of the LORD,
And seen, and heard His word—
He who has listened to His word must obey.
Lo, the storm of the LORD goes forth in fury,
A whirling storm,
It shall whirl down upon the heads of the wicked.
The anger of the LORD shall not turn back
Till it has fulfilled and completed His purposes.
In the days to come
You shall clearly perceive it.

I did not send those prophets,
But they rushed in;
I did not speak to them,
Yet they have prophesied.
(Jeremiah 23: 16-21)

¹⁷ As Steven Grosby emphasizes, for Judaism, contrasted with the other-worldly or unworldly possibilities held out by Christianity and Buddhism, "there is no goal to flee from the joys and sorrows of this world. Jews are meant to prosper in this world; they are to be fruitful and multiply in their land . . ." (Jerusalem and Athens: A Defense of Jerusalem," in *Hebraic Political Studies* 3 (Summer 2008): 241.

One problem facing those who heard Jeremiah rail against false prophets, of course, was how to determine that Jeremiah himself was a true prophet. This issue came to a head in Chapter 28, which presents a dramatic encounter between Jeremiah and Hananiah. This episode (as does the denunciation of false prophets in the book of Jeremiah generally) illustrates that the conflict was both theological and political, and concerned both the will of God and Judah's relationship with Babylon (as well as other nations also subdued by Babylon).

Prior to his confrontation with Hananiah, God had ordered Jeremiah to make a wooden yoke and to wear it as a symbol of God's will that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon rule over Judah as God's chastisement to his "stiff-necked people" (see, e.g., 17: 23 and 19: 15). Babylon, in turn, would then be overthrown by a coalition of nations (27: 5-7). According to Jeremiah's message, Babylon's rule over Judah would last for seventy years (25: 11-12). Judah, along with the other nations conquered by Babylon, should peacefully serve Nebuchadnezzar. This line of argument could certainly generate opposition on the part of nationalists committed to self rule, but it might also present difficulties for the pious believer who understood that the God of the Hebrews is a God of deliverance from oppression.

One can clearly see the political implications in Jeremiah's message in the following passage: "The nation or kingdom that does not serve him—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and does not put its neck under the yoke of the King of Babylon, that nation will I visit—declares the LORD—with sword, famine, and pestilence, until I have destroyed it by his hands. As to you, give no heed to your prophets, augurs, dreamers, diviners, and sorcerers, who say to you, 'Do not serve

the king of Babylon.’ For they prophesy falsely to you—with the result that you shall be banished from your land; I will drive you out and you shall perish. But the nation that puts its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serves him, will be left by Me on its own soil—declares the LORD—to till it and to dwell on it” (27: 8-11).

Jeremiah’s speech on the necessity that Judah serve Babylon emphasizes four points. First, the God of Israel is the God of history, and that what happens in history is the instantiation of God’s will. Second, at this time God has delivered Judah and other lands into Nebuchadnezzar’s hands. Third, resistance to Babylon or failure to serve the king will lead to worse things. Fourth, the people of Judah should not believe those who say that service to Babylon can be avoided or that Nebuchadnezzar can be successfully resisted.¹⁸

Hananiah confronted Jeremiah in the temple, with priests and “all the people” as witnesses, and his message countered that of Jeremiah. “Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: I hereby break the yoke of the king of Babylon. In two years, I will restore to this place all the vessels of the House of the LORD which Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took from this place and brought to Babylon. And I will bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the Judean exiles who went to Babylon—declares the LORD. Yes, I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon” (28: 2-4).

As Patrick Miller notes, “Nowhere more dramatically than this is the reader placed before the conflict of prophecy that seems to have been fairly common in

¹⁸ Patrick D. Miller, “Jeremiah,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VI: Introduction to Prophetic Literature; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Baruch; Letter of Jeremiah; Lamentations; Ezekiel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). pp. 782-83.

Israel and Judah, a conflict of alternative, indeed contradictory visions of what God was doing in their time.” Miller also emphasizes that “in formal ways—that is, in his manner of speech and action—Hananiah is fully comparable to Jeremiah.”¹⁹ In another evaluation of Hananiah, Walter Brueggemann suggests that “we may imagine that he spoke in good faith and believed he was articulating a serious form of bold and responsible faith. He is likely not a charlatan or huckster.”²⁰

For a prophet known for his attention-getting symbolic acts and his “fire and brimstone” delivery, Jeremiah’s response to Hananiah was surprisingly muted. He first expressed his heartfelt longing, “Amen! May the LORD do so!”²¹ He then turned to a consideration of the marks of true prophecy. “But just listen to this word which I address to you and to all the people: The prophets who lived before you and me from ancient times prophesied war, disaster, and pestilence against many lands and great kingdoms. So if a prophet prophesies good fortune, then only when the word of the prophet comes true can it be known that the LORD really sent him” (28: 6-9).

Jeremiah’s first point is that the prophetic tradition in Israel had emphasized the prophecies of doom (or calls for repentance and a return to Israel’s true faith) rather than prophecies of peace. This comment was perhaps intended to encourage his listeners not to overindulge in wishful thinking. His second point is not that

¹⁹ Miller, p. 784.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 251.

²¹ “In truth Hananiah uttered the ‘wish’ in Jeremiah’s heart. The words in v. 6 are not sarcastic.” Jacob M. Myers, “The Book of Jeremiah,” in Herbert C. Alleman and Elmer E. Flack, eds., *Old Testament Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948): 721. Brueggemann is ambivalent on this point, saying that Jeremiah’s response might acknowledge the possibility of Hananiah’s position or it might be ironic or even sarcastic, with “Amen” being equivalent to “Yeah, right!” Brueggemann, p. 252. Abraham Heschel has no doubt of the sincerity of Jeremiah’s “Amen!” because “the prediction of doom was contrary to his own feelings” (pp. 121-122).

anyone who predicts punishment or judgment is necessarily speaking for God²² and that a prophecy of salvation or deliverance should only be taken as the word of God when it actually comes true, but is a harkening back to a standard for judging prophecy originally set forth by Moses.

Among the items Moses discussed in his second address in Deuteronomy was prophecy. “And should you ask yourselves, ‘How can we know that the oracle was not spoken by the LORD?’—if the prophet speaks in the name of the LORD and the oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by the LORD; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously: do not stand in dread of him” (Deuteronomy 18: 21-22). This test is only negative, however, in that it can tell one what “was not spoken by” God—any prophecy that does not come true—but it cannot tell one what has been spoken by God. Moses’ test does not say that a prophecy’s coming true is proof that it was from God. In fact, earlier in the same address Moses had warned against taking the ability to foretell the future as an argument for automatically following the advice of a prophet (Deuteronomy 13: 1-5).²³

Jeremiah seems to imply that a prophecy of peace which comes to pass should be accepted as coming from God, perhaps on the presumption that peace is always a miracle that requires divine intervention and support. In any case, at this

²² However, the editor of Jeremiah for *The Jewish Study Bible* does add the following marginal note for vv. 7-9: “Jeremiah here advances the definition of true prophecy by accepting all prophecy of doom as true, ipso facto. The audience could not afford to wait to see if a prophecy of doom would come true” (p. 982).

²³ See Grosby, pp. 246-247. The discussion of tests for prophecy is preceded by a warning that will prove to be important as the story of Hananiah develops: “Any prophet who presumes to speak in My name an oracle that I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet shall die” (Deuteronomy 18: 20). Hobbes quotes Deuteronomy 13: 1-5 in his discussion of the signs of a true prophet (see *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley, ed. [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994], pp. 247-248).

point in the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah the listener is confronted with two prophecies—Jeremiah’s word that Babylon would rule Judah for seventy years, and Hananiah’s that the holy articles taken from the temple and the exiles would return to Jerusalem in two years and the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar would be broken.

In evaluating these conflicting prophecies we might consider the two prophets. Jeremiah had already had a long history in Judah, and there was a certain basic consistency in his message over time. On the negative side it should be noted that the possibility of exile as a punishment from God did not enter his prophecy along with famine and war until after the exile had begun. We know little about Hananiah other than his home and the name of his father (28: 1) and that he was a forceful personality in his one appearance in the Bible. As Miller notes, “we do not know what sort of prophetic experience Hananiah may have had.”²⁴ On Hananiah’s behalf it should be said that he did not hide behind generalities that would allow him to claim his prophecy had come true regardless of what happened—his prophecy was so specific in terms of happenings and time that he must have been confident in his claims. And, unlike Jeremiah’s long-term prediction, Hananiah’s could be judged by the “came true test” in just two years.

After Jeremiah’s reflection on the tradition of prophecy in Israel, Hananiah showed that he also was a master of symbolic action. “But the prophet Hananiah removed the bar from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it; and Hananiah said in the presence of all the people, ‘Thus said the LORD: So will I break the yoke of

²⁴ Miller, p. 784.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from off the necks of all the nations, in two years.’ And the prophet Jeremiah went on his way” (28: 10-11).

For the second time in this brief episode Jeremiah responds in a surprising and subdued manner. After Hananiah breaks his yoke and repeats his prophecy, Jeremiah simply “went on his way.” Why did Jeremiah retire without a word? Perhaps he initially intended to wait the two years for Hananiah’s prophecy to show itself false. Perhaps he was overwhelmed by Hananiah’s masterful performance. John Skinner emphasizes the “introspective bent” of Jeremiah and raises the possibility that he too could be impressed by the forceful style of his opponents. Skinner concludes, “In his encounter with Hananiah he seems to have quailed for a moment before the vehemence of his opponents enthusiasm, and to have felt a misgiving as whether he might not be right.”²⁵ Jacob Myers suggests something along similar lines: “To the delight of the people, the evil omen of Jeremiah was shattered. Only after the lapse of some days did he recover his poise.”²⁶

While Hananiah left Jeremiah speechless—or more accurately, Jeremiah just left speechless—within a short time Jeremiah came to his senses and once more “the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah” (28: 12). This is the message Jeremiah received from God: “Go say to Hananiah: Thus said the LORD: You broke bars of wood, but you shall make bars of iron instead. For thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke upon the necks of all those nations, that they may serve King

²⁵ John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 189.

²⁶ Myers, p. 722.

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and serve him they shall! I have even give the wild beasts to him” (28: 13-14).

These words are a recapitulation of Jeremiah’s basic message with an addition to acknowledge and repudiate Hananiah’s breaking of Jeremiah’s yoke. These, however, are not the words that Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah when he sought him out. Rather, “the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, ‘Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, and you have given this people lying assurances. Assuredly, thus said the LORD: I am going to banish you from off the earth. This year you are shall die, for you have urged disloyalty to the LORD’” (28:15-16). Brueggemann argues that Jeremiah articulates God’s lawsuit against Hananiah. Verse 15 contains the charge, “The LORD has not sent you, and you have given this people lying assurances,” and verse 16 presents the sentence, “this year you are shall die.”²⁷ Did God instruct Jeremiah to say this to Hananiah in an oracle not recorded in Jeremiah’s book, or was this Jeremiah’s belated and irritated spontaneous response to Hananiah’s demeaning behavior toward him in the temple? The account of Jeremiah’s encounter with Hananiah concludes with a brief postscript: “And the prophet Hananiah died that year, in the seventh month” (28: 17). Jeremiah’s final words to Hananiah recalled the Mosaic warning: “Any prophet who presumes to speak in My name an oracle that I did not command him to utter . . . that prophet shall die” (Deuteronomy 18: 20). Could they have been, in some way, a self-fulfilling prophecy or a hex? Or was Hananiah’s death a sign that Jeremiah’s words had, indeed, come from the God?

²⁷ Brueggemann, p. 254.

Miller argues, “The decision between Jeremiah and Hananiah is easy for the readers of the story, not because of fine distinctions between form or content but because the word of Jeremiah came to pass and Hananiah’s did not.”²⁸ But let me add a few complicating cautions. First, the “tests” for true prophecy as initially stated in Deuteronomy are less straightforward and harder to interpret than Jeremiah’s recasting of them.

Second, Hananiah’s message of God’s shalom for his people was not a novel idea that he simply made up but grew out of the covenantal tradition.²⁹ Hananiah emphasized God’s care but neglected the reciprocal responsibilities of his people. Brueggemann argues that Hananiah spoke for the establishment ideology which accepted the benefits of being a chosen people but rejected their obligations. Hananiah’s hope for peace, “rooted in an old, treasured memory, in this context, is an ideological distortion.” Brueggemann maintains that Hananiah’s position “does not reflect what God is doing here and now. If the present-tense reality of God cannot be discerned, then any prophetic discernment is likely ideology. Thus yesterday’s certitude has become today’s distorting ideology.”³⁰ This whole argument is complicated by the fact that early on Jeremiah had said to God, “Surely You have deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying: It shall be well with you—yet the sword threatens the very life!” (4.10).³¹ To the extent that Jeremiah’s accusation

²⁸ Miller, p. 785.

²⁹ See p. 6 above.

³⁰ Brueggemann, p. 251.

³¹ While some commentators seek to deflect Jeremiah’s accusation from God to false prophets (e.g., see the editorial note for this verse in *The NIV Study Bible*, p. 1126), others emphasize that Jeremiah is directing his charge directly at God. See the editorial note in *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 930, and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible*

against God is justified, God himself would appear to be the author of the deceit of shalom that Hananiah is punished for articulating. Under such uncertain and turbulent conditions yesterday's certitudes will indeed appear less than certain today.

Third, during the entire biblical account of Hananiah's encounter with Jeremiah, Hananiah appears to be treated in the text with utmost respect, unlike the depiction offered of other "false prophets." In this context it is important to recall Miller's argument that "in manner and address" Hananiah was "fully comparable" to Jeremiah and Brueggemann's emphasis on the "good faith" of Hananiah's self understanding.³² In any case, throughout the text, including the note on his death, Hananiah is called a "prophet."³³

Miller is perhaps correct that the job of evaluating Jeremiah and Hananiah is easier for readers of the text than for those listening to them during their confrontation. If this view is correct, at least part of the reason it is easier relates to the framing of the story by the author or editor of the text. As Miller writes, "[The Hananiah episode] is preserved in the record precisely as a vindication of Jeremiah's prophecy, for the later readers know how things worked out."³⁴ Brueggemann identifies some of those future readers as being part of "the tradition of Jeremiah,"

Commentary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 493: "In the first person Jeremiah accuses YHWH directly: divine deception caused the catastrophe."

³² See p. 10 above.

³³ Eric Voegelin makes a comment that has implications for understanding the status of Hananiah: "When Jeremiah scolds the people for worshipping 'false' gods, he wavers between the two suppositions that the false gods are non-gods (the question of truth) and that, though false, they are gods nevertheless (the question of participation). Even with a lower degree of transparency, participation is still participation; and the noetic luminosity of consciousness of the tension toward the ground is still nothing more than participation" (Eric Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin Volume 6: Anamnesis*, David Walsh, ed. [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002], p. 351).

³⁴ Miller, p. 785.

which he characterizes as “committed and self-conscious of its memory,” and speculates that the story of Jeremiah’s encounter with Hananiah as it appears was shaped “for the sake of the canon” rather than for Jeremiah’s contemporary audience.³⁵ These final considerations take us far beyond the initial revelation of Jeremiah, and provide a framework for a consideration of how a revelation to one man may work its way into the community’s consciousness.

³⁵ Brueggemann, p. 252.

II: STAGES OF REVELATION

The Book of Jeremiah depicts the man Jeremiah as receiving messages or oracles from God and in turn delivering those messages to the people of Judah, to the leadership of Judah, or to the rulers of other nations. The Book of Jeremiah also depicts the prophet Jeremiah as arguing, complaining, or pleading with God,³⁶ and at times, perhaps, arguing, complaining, and pleading with himself. The primary experience documented in Jeremiah, however—primary because it is the experience that originates all of the other action depicted—is the revelation that the prophet Jeremiah receives from God.

How would one respond when accosted by God and told that he has been appointed “a prophet to the nations”? How should one respond to such an occurrence? Jeremiah seems to have responded the way many others in the Bible so approached did, by doubt or denial: “Ah, Sovereign LORD, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child” (1: 6). This is similar to both Moses’ and Isaiah’s reactions to the call from God, to Mary’s response to the annunciation angel.

H. Richard Niebuhr asks an important question about the nature of revelation that should be noted here, at the point of discussing an initiating revelation. “If we say that revelation means divine self-disclosure we seem to infer that we can recognize God in revelation, which implies a previous knowledge of him. Is it really possible then to begin with revelation? Must we not go back of this self-disclosure to some previous knowledge of God, to an original or general revelation,

³⁶ Jeremiah is instructed to deliver—and does deliver—messages that he himself does not always fully embrace.

or to some ideal of God, some value-concept or other demand of reason through which we are able to recognize the historical event as a realization of the ideal?”³⁷

One possible implication of this formulation is that it that it seems to make man the active partner (or at least “an” active partner, along with God, as opposed to being a “receiver” only) in the process of revelation.³⁸ That at least seems to be one possibility arising from his question, “Is it really possible then to begin with revelation?” Suppose that an individual who had no conception of the divine encountered and is then accosted by a burning bush. It is at least possible that this experience itself might lead to the instantaneous generation of the previously nonexistent concept “God” in the mind of the encounterer. Something like that would be revelation with a capital “R”: an experience that didn’t simply correct or build on a previously held but inadequate view of God, but that was so powerful it both originated and confirmed the idea of God in the mind addressed. If “revelation” is more than a hypothetical construct designed to allow one to build an argument (as, for example, one might use the notion of a “social contract” to explain how political communities arose), then there must have been an original revelation (by that I simply mean a first revelation)—an original encounter with God in which the idea of God itself was created by (or implanted in) the individual undergoing the experience. Let us suppose that an individual undergoes such a powerful experience

³⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006 [1941]), p. 82.

³⁸ This question concerning man’s active or mediating role in revelation becomes important if we move beyond a “dictation model” of revelation. Consider the four gospel accounts of Jesus with their differences of emphasis and detail—how much are those differences determined by the differences in interest, intention and personality of the four writers? And, what is the significance of this human mediation for the sacred status of the Gospel texts?

that she has no doubt that she has been given a message from God, and that she is instructed to pass it on to someone else.

A tentative “first stage of revelation” is thus the actual experience itself—a “revelation” or vision as experienced by one individual. She returns home and tells her neighbor what happened: she offers her testimony, which is the statement of the person having undergone a revelatory experience explaining what happened. No matter how dramatically she tells of her experience and how fervently she avows certitude, it is unlikely that her account will have the impact on her neighbor that the revelatory experience had on her. Thomas Hobbes raises an important consideration on this very point.

When God speaketh to man, it must be either immediately or by mediation of another man to whom he had formerly spoken by himself immediately. How God speaketh to a man immediately may be understood by those well enough to whom he hath so spoken; but how the same should be understood by another is hard, if not impossible, to know. For if a man [profess] to me that God hath spoken to him supernaturally and immediately, and I make doubt of it, I cannot easily perceive what argument he can produce to oblige me to believe it.³⁹

From a Christian perspective, the possibility of immediate communication from God to contemporary men and women through the Holy Spirit is real, but Hobbes caution would hold here also.⁴⁰ While Hobbes is correct that one person’s direct experience of God is not necessarily evidence for another, it should also be equally clear that one person’s lack of direct experience with God does not invalidate or disprove another’s direct experience.

³⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), p. 246. I have substituted “profess” for “pretend” above (see editor’s glossary to Hobbes, p. 556).

⁴⁰ At least one strain of Christian thought suggests that God does not choose to speak to all or offer a message of universal good news, but communicates only to those who have been preordained to be among the elect.

In any case, it must be emphasized the practical skepticism⁴¹ Hobbes articulates is not simply a modern phenomenon, but as my discussion above concerning tests of true prophecy has suggested, understanding when a true revelation had occurred was a matter of concern during a period in which the possibility of miracles and divine revelation was more readily accepted than it is today. Again, remember the very practical question asked in Deuteronomy 18: 21: “How can we know that the oracle was not spoken by the LORD?” In the Gospels this practical skepticism is illustrated in the accounts of the inner circle of Christ after his crucifixion—since each of the four gospels notes that among the disciples themselves there were those who did not accept the reports of Christ’s resurrection⁴² one can assume that this disbelief was widespread.

This juncture connecting the revelatory experience of one person to a wider community through the witness of that person is crucial if the revelation is to survive in some sense. In the face of a practical skepticism which turns out to be widespread when the “revelatee” offers his witness, he may come to question his own experience and conclude that what he initially took to be a divine encounter

⁴¹ I would distinguish what I have called “practical skepticism” (or amateur skepticism) from ideological (or professional) skepticism. Practical skepticism represents a common sense approach that is open to a variety of experiences but needs proof (in whatever form is appropriate) before signing on. Ideological skepticism denies the possibility of certain types of experience or knowledge a priori, and therefore needs not consider evidence at all. Ideological skepticism therefore claims to know for certain some very important things! On this point consider Michael Oakeshott’s *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, Timothy Fuller, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). I am not here arguing that Hobbes is a practical (as opposed to a professional) skeptic, but merely stating that the view quoted can be understood in that sense.

⁴² See Matthew 28: 27, Mark 16: 12-14, Luke 24: 9-11, 36-37, and John 20: 24-29.

was merely the result of exhaustion, indigestion, over-active imagination,⁴³ and attempt a return to their normal life as if nothing had happened.

If, however, the revelatee retains the strong sense of having received a revelation and an obligation to somehow provide a witness to this, she must find a way to manage her life that takes this reality into account. One possibility would be to attempt to maintain a normal external life by continuing one's previous patterns of activities and relationships while fostering a secret inner life focused on the revelation. To the extent that a part of the revelation itself was to share the "good news" (or, with Jeremiah fresh in mind, the "bad news") with others the potential prophet will have to navigate an inner tension that over time may become unbearable. Alternatively, the revelatee may decide to make spreading this message his primary occupation by confronting everyone who happens to cross his path with a dramatic retelling of his experience and the attendant message of warning or hope. Either of these choices may have long run negative consequences for his health and reputation.

⁴³ Hobbes writes, "To say [God] hath spoken to him in a dream is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him, which is not of force to win belief from any man that knows dreams are for the most part natural and may proceed from former thoughts (and such dreams as that, from self-conceit, and foolish arrogance, and false opinion of a man's own godliness, or other virtue, by which he thinks he hath merited the favour of extraordinary revelation). To say that he hath seen a vision, or heard a voice, is to say that he hath dreamed between sleeping and waking; for in such manner a man doth many times take his dream for a vision, as not having well observed his own slumbering. To say he speaks by supernatural inspiration is to say he finds an ardent desire to speak, or some strong opinion of himself, for which he can allege no natural and sufficient reason" (p. 247). In the spirit of Christmas one might also think of Scrooge's initial reaction to the appearance of Marley's ghost: "Why do you doubt your senses?" "Because," said Scrooge, "a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are" (Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* [New York: Bantam Books, sixth reissue 1997], p. 18).

This should not be surprising given the depiction of prophets in the Bible. Jeremiah and other biblical prophets were characterized by odd behavior. One of Jeremiah's complaints to God is, "I have become a constant laughingstock, Everyone jeers at me" (20: 7). I shall not pursue this theme here, but note Abraham Heschel's conclusion to his important discussion of "prophecy and psychosis." He writes, "The prophet is a person who suffers from a profound maladjustment to the spirit of society, with its conventional lies, with its concessions to man's weakness. . . . The prophet's maladaptation to his environment may be characterized as *moral madness* (as distinguished from madness in a psychological sense)." ⁴⁴

Rather than hiding the truth deep within or becoming a street corner prophet, another possibility might be that the revelatee will share her story with a few of her closest and most trusted friends. If the experience were accompanied by significant positive long-term changes in one's outlook on life, personality, and

⁴⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, volume II* (New York: Harper and Row, "Harper Torchbooks," 1975), p. 188. Heschel continues, "The mind of the prophet, like the mind of a psychotic, seems to live in a realm different from the world which most of us inhabit. Yet what distinguishes the two psychologically is most essential. The prophet claims to sense, to hear, and to see in a way totally removed from a normal perception, to pass from the actual world into a mysterious realm, and still be able to return properly oriented to reality and to apply the content of his perception to it. While his mode of perception may differ sharply from the perceptions of all other human beings, the ideas he brings back to reality become a source of illumination of supreme significance to all other human beings" (p. 188). Eric Voegelin also hints at the disorienting tensions involved in being acutely sensitive to spiritual reality: "[T]he absence of a secure hold on reality and the demanding spiritual strain are generally characteristic of border experiences in which man's knowledge of transcendent being, and thereby of the origin and meaning of mundane being, is constituted" (*Science, Politics and Gnosticism* [Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., "Gateway Editions," 1997], p. 750).

Heschel emphasizes Jeremiah's "ambivalence in [his] understanding of his own experience" by offering an unexpurgated translation of 20: 7: "O Lord, Thou hast seduced me,/And I am seduced;/Thou hast raped me/And I am overcome." Writes Heschel, "The words used by Jeremiah to describe the impact of God upon his life are identical with the terms for seduction and rape in the legal terminology of the Bible." See Heschel, *Prophets: Introduction*, pp. 113-114. By my own reckoning, Jeremiah at times exemplifies each of the attitudes in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "stages of grief": denial, anger (at times with God, at times with Judah, at times with himself), bargaining, depression, and acceptance. See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. . While for some being a prophet may be easy, but being Jeremiah was never an easy task.

activities, these friends might come to accept the reality of their friend's experience, and might come to believe in the revelation themselves.

I have thus far assumed that the revelation would come to one person alone,⁴⁵ but a "group revelation" is also a possibility, one which perhaps would make establishing a nucleus of believers a bit easier. Consider the account of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses as an example of such a revelation. One might assume that the group of people Moses led into the wilderness contained some who believed that Moses was God's prophet sent to deliver the children of Israel from Pharaoh's hand, while others were not convinced but were going along to be with friends and family, still others who didn't believe this at all but thought anything (including the possibility of a quick death in battle), was better than remaining under Egyptian oppression, and finally some who saw the whole enterprise as a scam and they wanted a piece of the action. The survivors of this ordeal, whatever their personal motives for accompanying Moses to begin with, could look back on the entire exodus experience as a revelation of God's care and guidance for his chosen people.

I have suggested that the direct revelation itself as experienced by an individual (or individuals) is the first stage, and this is followed by the witness of those who had the direct experience to others who did not as the second stage. With the development of a community of believers the dynamic of sharing the revelation changes and we move into a new stage of development. As the community grows

⁴⁵ The story of Israel begins with God's encounter with and promise to Abram (Genesis 12: 1-9), and Islam grows out of the divine revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad (Sura 53. 1-11; also see Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* 4th ed. [Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011], pp. 50-61).

larger and as time passes, witness will become an inadequate means of transmitting the message of revelation. As the community grows and perhaps disperses over a larger geographical territory it will be difficult for the revelatee to share her story personally with all of the members of the community. Over time, the revelatee will age and eventually, unless there is another divine intervention to prevent it, will die. For the community to know and share in the revelation, the witness of the revelatee needs to be supplemented by accounts, confessions, and ritual reenactments that will keep the story of revelation alive for those who are now geographically and temporally separated from the revelation itself. These accounts and confessions may initially be oral statements repeating verbatim the witness of the revelatee, and later may be written down in an attempt to ensure consistency and permanency. In time these confessions will replace the witness of the prophet when her voice is silenced by death. Thus the stage of witness is followed by the stage of confession, in which formalized accounts of the revelation and rituals celebrating it are the focus of experience and belief.

Some of these accounts and confessional statements may be held to be more sacred than others, perhaps because they are the verbatim accounts of the prophet or were actually written by the prophet himself or one of his intimates. Some early documents may be understood that have come directly from God, and the initial revelation may have been the transmission of these materials to the prophet. In cases such as these, we can identify a fourth stage of revelation, the establishment of sacred scriptures.

The revelation as initially given may or may not have propositional content—it may simply be the first person narrative of the revelatee of the time he met a powerful personality who either awed him into a worshipful attitude or befriended him and left him with a sense of gratitude. Given that man is a curious creature and therefore seeks to understand the foundations of the things he encounters and the interrelation of apparently disconnected experiences and entities, even if the initial revelation is non-propositional at some point someone will likely develop propositions and hypotheses in an effort to understand and explain the foundations and implications of the revelatory experience. Thus, a fifth stage of revelation will be birth of the science of theology. This in turn leads to the questions of whether the restatement of revelation as doctrine and then the development and refinement of that doctrine should be seen as a stage of revelation and whether revelation is ongoing and cumulative.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ See John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

III: REVELATION AND CONVERSATION

The discussion above is not intended to provide an historical account of any particular tradition of revelation or to suggest that all such traditions follow the same developmental path.⁴⁷ Rather it is an attempt to think through the logic of how a private revelation—which, as Hobbes correctly argues, cannot be replicated or directly accessed by other individuals—can become a part of the experience of a wider community and perhaps become part of “the conversation of mankind.”

In his essay, “Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle,” Soren Kierkegaard perhaps intimates that revelation will never become integrated into the human conversation but will always remain separate and apart, an undigested challenge to man’s wisdom. Kierkegaard identifies two differences between a genius and an apostle that are of importance. First, while both the genius and the apostle may have something new to offer the human race, over time what the genius offers “disappears again as it becomes assimilated by the human race.” The new thing the apostle presents, however, always remains distinct because “it is essentially paradoxical, and not an anticipation in relation to the development of the race.”⁴⁸ Second, the genius is listened to for his insight, for his creativity, for his profundity, or for his wisdom, but the apostle is listened to because he possesses “divine

⁴⁷ See Ward, pp. 218-221 for a similar account of the development of the Old and New Testaments with a slightly different ordering of stages. His fourth and final stage occurs when “a canon of Scripture is defined by the communal authorities, marking a significant completion of a matrix of revelation for this community” (p. 218). Ward places the establishment of a canon last because it simultaneously represents an ending and a new beginning. Ward recognizes that “there may be many other things to be said about God and much still to learn” but emphasizes the role of scripture in focusing and shaping new insight. “Canonical scripture is the basic matrix—the mould and source—of the community’s subsequent reflections about its life with God” (p. 219).

⁴⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, “Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle,” in *The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, Alexander Dru trans. (New York: Harper and Row, “Harper Torchbooks,” 1962), p.91.

authority”⁴⁹—the message delivered by the apostle “cannot be thought, but only believed.”⁵⁰

Kierkegaard’s apostle would represent an individual at stage one of my developmental schema of revelation. As we move through each successive stage the dynamic of faith, experience, and authority will change. Using Weberian terms, the message of the apostle may contain charismatic elements, but as it becomes incorporated into the behavioral and intellectual life of the community it will become routinized and formalized. This, of course, is one of the great dangers in all movements founded on revelation, the falling away from the pure and true faith (that certainly is the Old Testament portrayal of Israel, God’s Chosen People) and the periodic need to be recalled to oneself and one’s God. Perhaps for this periodic cleansing to take place it is essential that the primary vision remain separate, just as Kierkegaard suggests. The story of the biblical prophets is one of recalling the people to those revelatory experiences that they have over time come to take for granted as “just so stories” or forgotten altogether.

I have attempted to illustrate above how a tradition of revelation may begin, and the account of Jeremiah shows that he was situated within a tradition that had many dimensions. First, Jeremiah’s family may have been tied closely to the history of Israel. When Saul ordered the execution of his priests because they sided with David (I Samuel 22: 6-19), Abiathar fled to David for protection (I Samuel 22: 20-23), and served him until, near the end of David’s life, he supported Adonijah to

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, p. 91.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, p. 99. Kierkegaard perhaps represents the position that Strauss seeks to argue is reflective of all approaches to revelation (see below).

succeed his father David on the throne (I Kings 1: 7). David selected Solomon as his heir to the throne, however, and Solomon executed Adonijah and sent Abiathar into exile in Anathoth (I Kings 2: 23-27). As John Skinner argues, when the Book of Jeremiah begins by identifying Jeremiah as “son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests at Anathoth” (1: 1), “the natural, though not absolutely certain, inference is that he belonged to this line, thus tracing his ancestry through the priesthood of Shiloh back to the time of Moses and the beginning of Israel’s history as a nation. If this be correct there was no family in Israel whose fortunes had been so closely bound up with the national religion as that into which Jeremiah was born.”⁵¹

Whether this family tree is accurate or not, the account of Jeremiah illustrates how the voice of revelation may enter into the general life of the community. Again, the story of Jeremiah the man is embedded in a community’s history and tradition. Jeremiah was not the first prophet to whom “the word of the LORD” came; rather, he was part of a long tradition in which God had spoken to and provided guidance for his people through prophets and others called for his purpose. Again John Skinner provides an important insight when he writes of “the direct influence of prophecy on the opening mind of Jeremiah. His familiarity with the ideas of the older prophets, especially with those of Hosea, appears so soon after his call, and that call came to him so early in life, that we may safely assume that he had know the prophetic writings and assimilated the principles of their teaching before he had reached the age of manhood.”⁵²

⁵¹ Skinner, p. 19.

⁵² Skinner, p. 21.

One other event reflective of the multiple traditions at play in the Book of Jeremiah should be mentioned. As recounted in 2 Kings 22, during the eighteenth year of King Josiah's reign (five years after Jeremiah's period of prophecy had begun), a scroll containing a version of Deuteronomy was uncovered during a renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem. For purposes of my discussion three aspects of Deuteronomy should be mentioned. First, the scroll apparently supported Jeremiah's warning of disaster. In response to a query concerning the scroll from King Josiah the prophetess Huldah replied, "Thus said the LORD: I am going to bring disaster upon this place and its inhabitants . . . Because they have forsaken me Me and have made offering to other gods and vexed Me with all their deeds, May wrath is kindled against this place . . ." (2 Kings 22:16-17). Second, Deuteronomy not just any old manuscript, but was held to have been written by Moses himself, and thus was sacred scripture—it is identified as "the covenant scroll" in 2 Kings 23: 2. Third, it should be remembered that Moses' crucial statements concerning the tests of true prophecy were contained in Deuteronomy. One might assume then that Jeremiah's allusion to these tests during his encounter with Hananiah would be particularly powerful rhetorically because they had just recently been recalled to the attention of Judah.

One response to my use of Jeremiah here would be to argue that since Judah was a nation that saw itself in a direct covenantal relationship with God it can provide no guidance or illumination for contemporary (perhaps post-religious) man on the question of revelation. I will therefore conclude with a brief discussion of

these questions from the perspective of thinkers closer to our own time and perhaps closer to contemporary sensibilities.

Leo Strauss argues, “Western civilization has two roots which are in conflict with each other, the biblical and the Greek philosophic.”⁵³ I will simply highlight three aspects of Strauss’ argument as they relate to my discussion. First, for Strauss the conflict is both stark and unavoidable: “No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian, or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both.”⁵⁴ This, according to Strauss, is a “radical opposition: the Bible refuses to be integrated into a philosophical framework, just as philosophy refuses to be integrated into a biblical framework.”⁵⁵ Second, the conflict between philosophy and theology is reducible to the conflict between reason and revelation.⁵⁶ Third, for Strauss “reason” involves “a free quest for the beginnings” which “proceeds through sense perception” and “awareness” (which he specifies as “an awareness with the mind’s eye as distinguished from sensible awareness”).⁵⁷ This reason “recognizes only such experiences as can be had by all men at all times in broad daylight.”⁵⁸ Revelation, however, is based on an “experience of God” grounded in “trust,” “faith,” “true obedience,” or “free

⁵³ Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* Vol. III (1979): 111.

⁵⁴ Strauss, p. 111. Later in this essay Strauss writes, “Generally stated, I would say that all alleged refutations of revelation presuppose unbelief in revelation, and all alleged refutations of philosophy presuppose already faith in revelation. *There seems to be no ground common to both, and therefore superior to both*” (p. 117; my emphasis).

⁵⁵ Strauss, p. 113.

⁵⁶ Strauss, pp. 112-116.

⁵⁷ Strauss, p. 112.

⁵⁸ Strauss, p. 116. It would be worth comparing Strauss’s understanding of reason and experience with the understanding of Hobbes.

surrender.”⁵⁹ These interior movements, however, are not “experiences as can be had by all men at all times in broad daylight.”

The outcome of this position is that, while theology or revelation can engage in argument, it cannot engage in conversation. Strauss sees “philosophy and Bible” as “the antagonists in the dram of the human soul” in which each “claims to hold the truth . . . But there can be only one truth . . . and that inevitably means argument.”⁶⁰ No more can revelation engage in what today is called interfaith dialogue than it can engage in conversation with philosophy, and so Strauss claims that there is “a need for argument between the various believers in revelation.”⁶¹ Strauss thinks that this argument “cannot be help but to allude somehow to objectivity,” but to the extent his understanding of objectivity is shaped by his understanding of reason it is difficult to see how this will occur or, from his perspective, what the point of this religious argument will be.

The understanding of revelation and reason that Eric Voegelin articulates in “The Gospel and Culture” is in dramatic contrast to that of Strauss just discussed. Here I will simply highlight one element of his complex discussion that is important for my argument. Man is primarily a questioner attempting to understand the mystery of existence. In his analysis of man the questioner Voegelin examines both Platonic “parables,” (the cave image from *The Republic* and the puppet image from *The Laws*) and biblical texts (John and Jeremiah).⁶² He concludes that the symbols

⁵⁹ Strauss, pp. 112, 116.

⁶⁰ Strauss, p. 114.

⁶¹ Strauss, p. 114.

⁶² Eric Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Published Essays 1966-1985* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, “The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12,” 1990), pp. 181-187

man uses in this questioning reflects the complexity of human existence. “The reality of existence . . . is a mutual participation of human and divine,” and our symbols therefore have a “double status” reflecting both the human and the divine elements of experience.⁶³ Christian theology, however, “has split the two components of symbolic truth” into “revelation” (“the divine component”) and “natural reason” (“the human component”). Voegelin concludes, “This theological doctrine is empirically untenable—Plato was just as conscious of the revelatory component in the truth of his *logos* as the prophets of Israel or the authors of the New Testament writings.”⁶⁴ Thus, from Voegelin’s perspective, Strauss’s discussion of reason and revelation does justice to neither reason nor revelation.

Rather than attempt to resolve the conflict between Strauss and Voegelin, or more broadly between revelation and reason, I will offer a few reflections and questions generated by my research on revelation.

1) Revelation is not primarily an expression of one’s mood or attitude toward life, but at bottom makes epistemological claims. As the discussion of the dynamics of the Book of Jeremiah illustrated, claims to revelation are not simply to be accepted on faith or blind trust but are to be evaluated in terms of our total experience. A part of that experience, but not necessarily the whole of it, involves empirical verification.

2) Strauss’s understanding of reason as “a free quest for beginnings” is no less questionable or more certain than is the concept of revelation. Reason itself

⁶³ Voegelin, “Gospel,” p. 187.

⁶⁴ Voegelin, “Gospel,” pp. 188-189. On p. 192, Voegelin states, “The noetic core, thus, is the same in both classic philosophy and the gospel movement” and then briefly identifies six common features of classical philosophy and gospel.

must be understood in terms of human experience, and one part of that experience involves the way in which human reasoning is embedded in social interaction and tradition. As Michael Polanyi suggests, even scientific reason and knowledge only makes sense within a community of science.⁶⁵ And more broadly, as Friedrich Hayek argues, “all rational thought moves within a non-rational framework of beliefs and institutions.”⁶⁶

3) Language has an essentially symbolic dimension that is important to recognize. If we understand this we may be able to see underlying similarities in experiences that appear to be contradictory if we take language to be literal depictions of material circumstance. Keith Ward argues that the idea of “gods speaking” is “too literal and anthropomorphic” an understanding of revelation, and that this view “fails to describe adequately the ambiguous nature of prophetic experience.”⁶⁷ Rather than take this as *prima facie* evidence that revelation is impossible, however, Ward reconceives revelation as “communications from the suprasensory realm”⁶⁸ in a way that retains its essential features as found in various religious traditions but simultaneously makes sense in the world of contemporary science.

4) In addition to conversation involving secular and religious perspectives it is worth considering the possibility of conversation or dialogue between various religious or faith traditions. In a section of *Religion and Revelation* entitled

⁶⁵ See Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), particularly chapter 2, “Authority and Conscience,” pp. 42-62.

⁶⁶ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 181.

⁶⁷ Ward, p. 89.

⁶⁸ Ward, pp. 66 and *passim*.

“pluralism in theology” Ward writes, “Even within one Church, discussion is an obvious feature of a lively religious practice.”⁶⁹ Is this a universal or a distinctively western phenomenon? Is Strauss correct that the framework for such discussion would be “objectivity”? In this connection it would be worth reflecting on Voegelin’s argument concerning “the equivalences of experience and symbolization”⁷⁰ as it relates to revelation and other experiential claims of the major world religions. Although I know of no indication in Keith Ward’s work that he is familiar with Voegelin, his approach to “comparative theology” aims at understanding the common experiences which are articulated differently in various religious traditions.

Finally, what is the future of revelation in the West? I conclude with a comment by Jürgen Habermas which points to the importance of revelation in the West’s past and present, and perhaps suggests the necessity of a renewed or continuing revelation if the West itself is to have a future.

Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ward, p. 45.

⁷⁰ Eric Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History,” in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, pp. 115-133. See my “Compactness, Poetic Ambiguity, and the Fiction of Robert Penn Warren,” in Charles R. Embry and Barry Cooper, eds., *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics: Essays Honoring Ellis Sandoz* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), for a discussion of Voegelin on symbolization at pp. 147-154.

⁷¹ Jürgen Habermas, “A Conversation About God and the World,” in *Time of Transitions*, edited and translated by Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (Malden MA: Polity Press, 2006), pp. 150-151. One of the implications of Strauss’s argument discussed above—“The very life of Western civilization is the

life between two codes, a fundamental tension." (p. 111)-is that if either root of the West should die, revelation or reason, the West itself will cease to exist.