Tajallī wa-Ruʿya: A Study of Anthropomorphic Theophany and Visio Dei in the Hebrew Bible, the Qurʾān and Early Sunnī Islam

by

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<td>Anchor Bible Dictionary</td>
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<tr>
<td>AcOr</td>
<td>Acta Orientalia</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANE</td>
<td>Ancient Near East(ern)</td>
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<td>ANRW</td>
<td>Aufstieg und Niedergang Der Römischen Welt</td>
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<td>ARW</td>
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<td>BA</td>
<td>Biblical Archaeologist</td>
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<td>BARew</td>
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<td>Biblical Theology Bulletin</td>
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<td>CAD</td>
<td>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</td>
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<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
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<td>DDD</td>
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<td>JBL</td>
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TLOT Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament
TToday Theology Today
TWAT Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament, ed. C.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren
TynBal Tyndale Bulletin
UF Ugaritische Forschungen
VC Vigiliae Christianae
VT Vetus Testamentum
VTSap Vetus Testamentum Supplement
WTJ Westminster Theological Journal
ZA Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Verwandte Gebiete
ZAW Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
Chapter 1:

Introduction to this Study

1.1 Theophany and Visio Dei in Islamic Tradition?

Until relatively recently it was axiomatic that Judaism is the religion of the invisible and non-theophanous deity; the God of Israel is heard but not seen.1 Critical scholarship, however, has demonstrated that this characterization is inaccurate both for biblical as well as extra-biblical religion.2 Indeed, ancient Israel shared its neighbors’ preoccupation with theophany and Visio Dei.3 Daniel Boyarin argues that it is only under Hellenistic influence that Jewish cultures exhibited any anxiety about the visibility of God:

The biblical and Rabbinic religions were quite free of such influences and anxieties. Thus I would identify Greek influences on Judaism in the Middle Ages as being the major force for repressing the visual. The Neoplatonic and Aristotelian revision of Judaism undertaken by the Jewish scholastics was so successful that it has resulted in the near-total forgetting of the biblical and Rabbinic traditions of God’s visibility.4

This near-total forgetting of an earlier tradition of theophany and Visio Dei finds its parallel, it will be argued, in the history of Islamic theological development. Islam is often

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1 Martin Jay took it as a given that the God of Judaism was “invisible and non-theophanous”: “The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crises of Ocularcentrism,” Poetics Today 9 (1988): 308 [art. = 307-326]. See also José Faur, Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 29-30: “Verbal representation of God, even in anthropomorphic terms, is common both to Scripture and the rabbis. What was offensive to the Hebrew was ‘to see’ God; that is, to express His reality at the visual level.”

2 See below, Chapter Two.

3 See Jeffrey J. Niehaus, God at Sinai: Covenant & Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) and below, Chapter Two.

viewed as the religion *par excellence* of divine transcendence.\(^5\) While the post-mortem Beatific Vision would become a cardinal point of Sunni orthodoxy,\(^6\) this is to be understood against the backdrop of Islam’s zealous defense of God’s absolute ‘otherness’ (*mukhālaṭa*). The latter precludes divine corporeality, and corporeality is the *sine qua non* of any object of ocular perception.\(^7\) No true ‘seeing’ of God, therefore is possible. This is especially true of humans in this world, even the prophets. Muhammad’s revelatory experience was completely auditory.\(^8\) Though he was hearing the very Speech of God (*Kālim Allāh*), he saw only the intermediating angel Jibrīl - never God himself. Faruq Sheriff’s statement in his, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’an*, would be found acceptable to Sunni and Shi‘ī theologians alike:

It follows clearly from the Qur’anic revelation that Allah does not reveal Himself through incarnation in human form or human attributes. The absolutely transcendent Deity cannot be directly apprehended by man.\(^9\)

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\(^5\) See e.g. William A. Graham, “Transcendence in Islam,” in Edwin Dowdy (ed.), *Ways of Transcendence: Insights From Major Religions and Modern Thought* (Bedford Park, South Australia: Australian Association 1982) 7-23; Muhammad Ibrahim H.I. Sury:; “The Conception of God In Muslim Tradition,” *IJQ* 37 (1993):127ff. J. Windrow Sweetman (*Islam and Christian Theology*, 3 Parts, 4 vols. [London: Lutterworth Press, 1947] pointed out back in 1947 that “(m)any writers have observed that Islam overemphasizes the transcendence of God.” H. U. Weithbrecht Stanton (*The Teaching of the Qur’an* [London: Central Board of Missions and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919], 35) likewise observed that “The idea of divine transcendence (is) so relentlessly developed by Moslem theology in its conception of *tanzih* = removal and *mukhālaṭa* = contrariety (between Allah and the creature)...” See also W.M. Watt’s comments (“Some Muslim Discussions of Anthropomorphism,” in idem, *Early Islam: Collected Articles* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990] 87): “We in the West tend to speak of Islam as stressing the transcendence of God, but it has to be remembered that, while for the West the chief aspect of transcendence is probably God’s might and majesty, for Islam it is rather His otherness from His creatures. This aspect is present in the Old Testament...but in the Muslim outlook its relative importance is greater.”


\(^7\) On the ‘orthodox’ belief in divine ‘otherness=incorporeality see Watt, “Some Muslim Discussions,” 87-9.


\(^9\) (Reding, 1995), 24.
Western scholars of Islam, often impressed by and even humbled before Islam’s “radical” doctrine of divine transcendence,\(^{10}\) have confirmed for us Islam’s categorical rejection of theophany and *Visio Dei*. Helmut Ritter, for example argued in 1955:

Islamic orthodoxy will absolutely not accept attributing a particular form to God. It concedes to the foremost of the senses (according to our conception, not that of the Arabs), the sense of sight, no share in God’s revelation, whereas it is all the more generous with regard to the second sense, that of hearing. To orthodox Islam the idea that God could have a visible form is an abomination.\(^{11}\)

The advancement in scholarship since Ritter wrote has done little to modify this view of Islam’s revelatory process. Stefan Wild, for example, in explaining why nuzūl, a technical term for the revelation of the Qurʿān, should not be translated by “revelation,” argues:

The translation of “revelation” for the Arabic word nuzūl is as inevitable as it is problematic. The Christian term “revelation” (Latin *revelatio*, Greek *apokalypsis*) is a metaphor meaning something like “unveiling”; the word “epiphany” (*epiphania*) means “becoming visible and audible for mankind, to reveal Himself.” This concept is foreign to the Qurʿān and Islam.\(^{12}\)

Thus, both Muslim theologians and Western scholars tend to agree that for “orthodox,” “normative,” or “mainstream” Islam, and by implication for Muhammad as well, God’s utter ‘otherness’ necessitates divine incorporeality and invisibility and therefore precludes any theophanic encounter for the prophets or any others.\(^{13}\) Indeed, God is so transcendentally unique that one wonders how a Muslim may experience him at all.\(^{14}\)

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1.2. Western Studies on Visio Dei in Islam

During the 8th through the 10th centuries Islam experienced what A.J. Wensinck characterized as a “dogmatic crises.” Various personalities and groups - stimulated both by indigenous concerns as well as foreign influences - contemplated and speculated on a host of theological issues and articulated novel doctrines and ideas, for which some were censured by the more moderate scholars. Many of these controversies revolved around the nature of God and his Attributes. Of fundamental concern to the disputants was Ru'ya, the Vision of God. While both traditionalists (ahl al-hadith) and speculative theologians (mutakallimun) generally denied that God could be seen in this life - the traditionalists basing their position on prophetic narrations and the theologians employing logical arguments as well as qur’anic proofs - the two sides polemicized furiously against one another over whether or not God will be seen by the faithful on the Day of Judgment. In the end, the Beatific Vision would become a pillar of Sunnī doctrine.

Within the larger controversy over Ru'ya there was the equally vexing issue of whether or not the Prophet himself saw God during his lifetime. Despite the guarantee from both

15 Thus Abdoldajavid Falatūrī opens his article, “How can a Muslim Experience God, Given Islam’s Radical Monotheism”: “Experiencing God is a problem in Islam because, in general, Muslim philosophical and theological thought has understood God as transcending all possible categories of being, because of his absolute unity and uniqueness. God is consequently so separated from man that the most he can hope for is an abstract, rational experience of God, provided he has been thoroughly trained in philosophy.” In Annemarie Schimmel and Abdoldajavid Falatūrī (edd.), We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979) 77.


19 See Tufi, “The Origins and Development.”

For a look at classic traditioinalist defense of the Beatific Vision see ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq b. Ḥanbal, al-Radd `alā Ṭarā`īṣ al-Zanādiqa wa ʿl-Jahmiya (Cairo, 1973)
Muslim and Western scholars that the God of Islam reveals himself to no one, there are numerous reports in the classical Arabic literature describing Muḥammad’s visual encounter with his Lord. The subject of this alleged vision of God was even more divisive than that of the Beatific Vision proper. Not only were the traditionalists and speculative theologians divided on the issue, but the hadith literature presents what could be described as a “heated” discussion among the Companions of the Prophet. This controversy over theophany and Visio Dei in Islam has received scant attention in the academic literature. Most handbooks on Islamic theological development say little or nothing about it. Such neglect seems to have been inherited from later Muslim authors for whom God’s mukhālafa militated against any visionary experience by anyone in this world (al-Dunyā). Shahrastānī (d. 1153), in his Kitāb al-milāt wa ’l-nihāl, enumerates ten disputes which occupied the community of the Sahāba, though he says nothing of the controversy which, according to the hadith literature, involved hard feelings, harsh accusations and a great many of the most famous Companions, 19 of which allegedly reported Muḥammad’s vision of God. Denial of the experience is attributed to ‘Ā’isha, Muḥammad’s favorite wife, as well as Abū Hurayra and ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd.

Other than a brief mention or a discussion of the conflicting interpretations of Sūrat al-Najm (53:1-18) and its relation to both Muḥammad’s Call and his ascension to heaven (mā’rāf), very few studies have devoted serious attention to this controversy, and those

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22 See below Chapter VI.


that have suffered from too limited a number of relevant sources used and from presumpions that skewed the researchers perspective and precluded their appreciation of the place of this debate in the history of Islamic theological development. Tor Andrae, in his thesis of 1917,\textsuperscript{25} was probably the first to recognize the importance tracing this dispute has for our understanding of the Islamic view of the divine.\textsuperscript{26} His eighteen-page discussion (68-85) is still foundational to any treatment of the subject.\textsuperscript{27} Andrae’s primary interest was Muḥammad’s *Himmelfahrt* and it was only in that context that he was able to discuss the dispute over Muḥammad’s alleged visionary encounter with God. This preoccupation is a major short-coming of the discussion. The *ruʿya*-tradition and the *miʿrāj*-tradition, though at times converging, are different traditions and must be analyzed as such;\textsuperscript{28} conflating the two only precludes adequate understanding of either, particularly the former.

Andrae noted that following the dispute in the sources was difficult due to the conflicting testimonies often attributed to the same authorities, early as well as later. As an example he cites the ‘double-face’ (*Doppelgesicht*) worn by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal on this issue, at least according to the sources.\textsuperscript{29} But Andrae’s sources were severely limited, a short-coming that limited the value of the entire discussion. We hope to demonstrate that a more comprehensive use of the available source material for Ibn Ḥanbal’s *aqidah* (creed), while certainly presenting conflicting views on a number of issues, nevertheless allows us to reconstruct the “Imām of Baghdad’s” position on this matter with a measure of

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\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Die person Muḥammeds in lehnen und glauben seiner gemeinde} (Stockholm: P.A. Vorstedt og zoner, 1918).

\textsuperscript{26} “In der tat ist die entwicklung der streitfrage für die islamische gottesauffassung wie für die schätzung des propheten von grosser bedeutung (73).”

\textsuperscript{27} See also his “Die legenden von der berufung Muḥammeds,” \textit{Le Monde Oriental} 6 (1912): 5-18, esp. 13ff.

\textsuperscript{28} See below.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Die person Muḥammeds}, 74-5.
confidence. Doing so is important, as Ibn Hanbal was the architect of the early Sunni 'aqīda and his followers remained its guardians for centuries thereafter.\(^{30}\) Andrae argued that, “Die legenden, die unbefangnen von der persönlichen begegnung des propheten mit seinem Gotte reden, stellen also volksgläuben, nicht theologische lehre dar.”\(^{31}\) We shall argue that this assessment is inaccurate. While many of the reports may in fact be anchored in volksgläuben, and this latter was certainly influenced by aḥādīth ai-rūya,\(^{32}\) still Muhammad’s rūya indeed became theological doctrine.

J. Windrow Sweetman included a brief discussion in his *Islam and Christian Theology*, claiming that “A large number of the orthodox Sunnis” admit such a vision.\(^{33}\) On the other hand, Hellmut Ritter was adamant that Islamic orthodoxy, admitting to only an acoustic revelation, rejected these reports in sum: “God reveals Himself to His prophets through acts of hearing, not through visions.”\(^{34}\) The idea of a visible, morphic deity - an idea that was ‘intolerable to orthodox Muslims’- invaded Islam (‘in den Islam ungedrungen ist’\(^{35}\)), maybe from Persian song, and is thus non-indigenous.

In his discussion of “Le Problème de la Vision de Dieu (Rūya) d’après quelques auteurs šī‘ites douodécimains,” Georges Vajda noted that though the problem of theophany occupied an important place in Muslim theological discourse, particularly of the second and third centuries AH, “il n’a pas été…traité de façon suffisamment ample et encore moins approfondie.”\(^{36}\) While our focus here is on the problem as it is discussed in Sunni literature, Vajda’s discussion is limited to Šī‘ī literature. Anthony Keith Tuft wrote his dissertation on the rūya controversy, but he was concerned only with “the

\(^{30}\) See below.

\(^{31}\) “The legends which unabashedly speak of the Prophet’s encounter with God depict popular belief, not theological doctrine”: *Die person Muhammeds*, 77.

\(^{32}\) See below.

\(^{33}\) I.II:220-223.

\(^{34}\) “Philologica II,” *Der Islam* 17 (1925): 255-257; idem, *The Ocean of the Soul*, 453-263.

\(^{35}\) “Philologica II,” 257.

controversy...at its most dramatic level, the vision of God after death.”37 Daniel Gimaret, in his article on “Ru’yat Allâh” for *The Encyclopedia of Islam* likewise concentrates on Sunnî discussions of the post-mortem Beatific Vision, only briefly mentioning that the question of Muḥammad’s vision of God in this world was controversial on account of two contradictory statements attributed to Ibn ‘Abbâs and ‘Â’isha.38 In two separate writings, Gimaret gives a number of the relevant reports extensive treatment;39 but his interest was not in the controversy per se, but in the various interpretations given to these reports by anti-anthropomorphist theologians.

The exception to this neglect among Western scholars is Josef van Ess who, in several writings, has expounded on the controversy as it relates to *surât al-Naṣr*[53]:1-18 and the narratives of Muḥammad’s Ascension to Heaven, the Miḥrâj.40 *Surât al-Naṣr* makes a highly ambiguous and enigmatic reference to two visionary encounters of the Prophet at the beginning of his career. Van Ess, following a long established Western tradition of reading these verses as expressing Muḥammad’s belief (unfounded, for sure) that he had seen God, is convinced, again in agreement with that same Western tradition of reading, that Muḥammad will later realize his error and acknowledge that it was only an angel that he had actually seen and mistaken for God, citing here *surât al-Takwîr* [81]:15-24, which van Ess takes as a later reference to one of the two visions mentioned in *surât al-Naṣr*.41 Nevertheless, van Ess argued that, though Muslim orthodoxy, both Sunnî and Shî‘î, will come to identify the *marâj* or object of Muḥammad’s visions there recorded as

37 “Origins and Development,” 3. See also ibid.

38 *E&F* 8:649 s.v. Ru’yat Allâh.


Jibril, the Angel of Revelation, at a earlier period, i.e., the late Umayyad period, "a broad consensus" supported the opposite interpretation: Muḥammad saw God. But this popular tradition of theophany and visio Dei will not survive the 'Muʿtazili onslaught,' van Ess informs us. As a result of the Muʿtazili critique Sunnism will acquire the anti-anthropomorphist sensibility of its theological enemy and jettison Muḥammad's Vision. In doing this, however, Sunnism only followed Muḥammad's example, for he too jettisoned the 'Vision' when, in Medina surrounded by Jews who knew better, he learned that God could not be seen.

In this dissertation we shall present evidence suggesting that this 'broad consensus' did indeed survive the 'Muʿtazili onslaught.' We shall argue that anthropomorphic theophany and Muḥammad's visio Dei remained important, even defining aspects of traditionalist Sunnism long after the critique and subsequent fall of the Muʿtazila. We shall argue also that this tradition of anthropomorphic theophany likely originated with Muḥammad himself rather than with later theological reflection. Pace van Ess and others, we shall

41 Van Ess, "Vision and Ascension," 55; Flowering of Muslim Theology, 72.

42 "Unrestricted anthropomorphism did not withstand the onslaught of the Muʿtazila: their theology in this respect shaped the Islamic identity until today." EF 10:343 s.v. Taḥbhīḥ wa-Tanzīḥ by Josef van Ess [art. =341-34]. As a result of this new scandalizing of anthropomorphism the community came to interpret the visions as visions of the angel Jibril (Flowering of Muslim Theology, 55; "Muḥammad's Ascension," 9; "Verbal inspiration? Language and revelation in Classical Islamic theology," in Wild, Qurʾan as Text, 187). Consequently, "l'ancienne exégèse anthropomorphiste [of Q.53:1-18] survécut, bien que en marge de la théologie officielle." "Le MFRĀC et la Vision de Dieu," 41.


argue that there is no evidence that Muhammad changed his position in Medina with regard to his visionary encounters.

1.3. Islam and the Semitic Monotheistic Tradition

Gerald R. Hawting, in taking up and elaborating upon John Wansbrough’s insistence that emergent Islam be seen as a continuation of the Near Eastern Semitic monotheistic tradition, makes an observation of great importance for this study:

That Islam is indeed related to Judaism and Christianity as part of the Middle Eastern, Abrahamic or Semitic tradition of monotheism seems so obvious and is so often said that it might be wondered why it was thought necessary to repeat it. The reason is that although it is often said, acceptance of Islam as a representative of the monotheist religious tradition is not always accompanied by willingness to think through the implications of the statement (emphasis added).

While both Muslim tradition and Western scholarship articulate a recognition of Islam’s place within the Semitic monotheistic tradition, not only is there often an unwillingness to embrace the implications of this recognition, but there is also in practice the tendency to distance Islam from that tradition. This is particularly the case regarding the Islamic Gotteslehre. Islam’s characteristic doctrine of mukhalafat, “(divine) otherness,” precludes the attribution to God of anything like corporeality, which is, as the Mu'tazila will argue, conditio sine qua non of visibility. But such a model of divine transcendence is Hellenistic, not Semitic. The Semitic, and the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) model in general, embraced both ‘otherness’ and corporeality/anthropomorphism: the gods were

46 See especially his Sectarian Millieu.


49 J. Windrow Sweetman defined the principle of mukhalafat, to which “the majority of Muslims) adheared”: “all that is said of God is said with a difference and it has become proverbial that nothing the mind can devise can convey anything about Allah... there can be no doubt that the rejection of the corporeality of God is essential.” Islam and Christian Theology 2 vols. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), 1. 2:34, 36. See also EP 1:410f. s.v. Allah by Gardet.

50 See Excursus below.
transcendently anthropomorphic,” to use Ronald Hendel’s term. That is to say, the gods possessed a form of human shape but of divine substance and quality.

Ancient Israel stood in linguistic, cultural and religious continuity with her neighbors in the Levant. And as Morton Smith pointed out in a classic article, Israel participated in “the common theology of the ancient Near East.” This means that the god(s) of Israel and the gods of the ANE actually differed less than has been supposed. Like the gods of

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the ANE, the god(s) of Israel and biblical tradition was anthropomorphic.\textsuperscript{56} This ancient Near Eastern/Semitic transcendent anthropomorphism stands in stark contrast to normative Islamic notions of divine transcendence. But the latter, as Fazlur Rahman well pointed out, "does not emerge from the Qur’ān, but from later theological development in Islam."\textsuperscript{57} This ‘later theological development’ included the appropriation of Hellenistic concepts in order to interpret the Qur’ān and the Sunna, particularly the statements about God\textsuperscript{58} and Duad Rahbar correctly drew attention to the “difference between Hellenized Islamic theology...and the simple Semitic atmosphere of the world-view of the Qur’ān.”\textsuperscript{59} This disparity between Semetic and Islamic notions of divine transcendence becomes more acute when one considers the insistence, by Islamic tradition and Western scholarship, that the deity is the same in the three monotheistic traditions: “The monotheists not only worship one God; he is the same god for all. Whether called Yahweh or Elohim, God the Father or Allah, it is the selfsame deity who created the

\textsuperscript{56} On biblical anthropomorphism and an anthropomorphic deity see below.

\textsuperscript{57} Fazlur Rahman, “The Qur’ānic Concept of God, the Universe and Man,” \textit{JS} 6 (1967): 2 [art.=1-19].


\textsuperscript{59} Dawd Rahbar, “Relation of Muslim Theology to the Qur’ān,” \textit{MW} 51 (1961): 45[art.=44-49].
world out of nothing.” What then is the relation between the anthropomorphic and visible Yahweh-El and the incorporeal and invisible Allah?

Part of the reason this disparity is rarely noticed or mentioned is because there is operating certain misperceptions regarding the monothestic Gottesnussfassung and these misperceptions inform the study of Islamic theology. Take for example Ritter’s statement that for Islam “God reveals Himself to His prophets through acts of hearing, not through visions,” and that Islam’s “horror of the idea of a visible form of God is a Jewish legacy.” Relevant too is W.M. Watt’s contention that the early Meccan Muslims abandoned their initial belief that Muhammad saw God because

in the course of time, through contact with Jews and Christians and in other ways, the Muslims would realize that it was widely believed that God could not be seen by man in the world-as (Sura 6:103) puts it, ‘sight reaches him (God) not’ and would therefore interpret the figure seen (in Sura al-Najm 1-18) as that of an angel.

Implied in both statements is the common belief that in Jewish and Christian tradition God is incorporeal, and therefore invisible. For sure, this is an accurate reading of post-Maimonidean Judaism and hellenized Christianity; but it is certainly a mischaracterization of most forms of Second- and Post-Temple Judaism and early Christianity, Jewish and otherwise. And as will be demonstrated in the first part of this

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61 See Chapter II below.


63 Murata and Chittick’s general observation (Vision, 46) is therefore a particularly apt one here: “It is true that the Koran’s view of things has a close kinship with both the Jewish and Christian world views, but most people in the modern world have little understanding of those world views either.”

64 Das Meer Der Seele, 439 (=The Ocean of the Soul, 453).


66 See Boyarin’s discussion, “The Eye in the Torah.”

dissertation, it is patently false in regards the biblical Gotteslehren in their many and at times divergent articulations.68

1.4. The Qur’ān and Biblical Tradition

"to understand the Qur’ān outside of the Biblical tradition...would seem in the end to place the researcher in a rather ridiculous position."69

Islam is, among other things for sure, clearly a formulation of ancient Near Eastern mythological tradition70 and Andrew Rippin rightly insists that the Qur’ān in particular


68 As we hope to show, E, J, P and the Deuteronomists explicitly or implicitly recognized the visual theophany, as did the Prophets and Psalms.


70 The Qur’ān is not only a genre of various trajectories of biblical and near eastern aggadot, but also a kaleidoscope which gives these trajectories a new vision”: Aaron Hughes, “The stranger at the sea: Mythopoiesis in the Qur’ān and early tafsīr,” SR 32 (2003): 266 [art. =61-279]; “It is no depreciation of Muhammad’s religious fervour to show his deep roots in ancient Near Eastern tradition; it is on the contrary, a tribute to his genius which enabled him to pour new wine into old skins. Neither need we assume direct borrowing from contemporary sources, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Gnosticism and Mandaean thought drew their inspiration from the same reservoir of ancient beliefs, each filling them with new meanings through their own peculiar genius.” Ise Lichtenstetter, “Origin and Interpretation of Some Qur’ānic Symbols,” Studi Orientalistici in Onore di Giorgio Le: Della Vida 2 (1956): 79-80 [art. =58-80]. On Islam and ancient Near Eastern mythological tradition see also idem, “Origin and Interpretation of Some Koranic Symbols,” in George Makdisi (ed.), Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of
be studied in the context of the overall Near Eastern religious milieu which preceded Islam's emergence.\(^7\) It is specifically the 'oriental monotheism,' to use John Wansbrough's characterization of the ancient Near Eastern biblical tradition, to which Islam and the Qur'ān are heir,\(^2\) a point the latter concedes.\(^3\) As Roberto Tottoli has emphasized, a number of Qur'ānic verses (e.g. 4:163; 42:13; 3:84) present Muhammad as

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\(^7\) Rippin, “The Qur'ān as Literature,” 45. See also idem, “God,” in Andrew Rippin (ed.), _Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān_ (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006) 225. This point was made as well by Umar F. Abd-Allah, “The Perceptible and the Unseen: The Qur'ānic Conception of Man's Relationship to God and Realities Beyond Human Perception,” in Spencer J. Palmer (ed.), _Mormons & Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations_ (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2002) 161 [art. 159-204]: “Accurate understanding of the pre-Islamic background within which Islam arose is essential to the full understanding of the Islamic religion.” See also Monther Sfar, _Le Coran, la Bible et l'Orient ancien_ (Paris: Cassini, 1997). Though ancient Arabia is sometimes thought of as religiously isolated from the ANE, archeological and epigraphic evidence for North and South Arabia indicates otherwise. As relatively scant as this evidence is, nevertheless it clearly shows pre-Islamic Arabia to have been within the 'mythological orbit' of the Near East, particularly in terms of motifs of the gods. For example, motifs associated with the cult of ba'als; the motif of the deity and his three hypostatic daughters; the motif of the winged-disk and its tauroform complement; the divine triad; and of the anthropomorphic god surrounded by his divine assembly, all characteristic of the ANE mythsic tradition, were also part of the Arabian mythic tradition as well. See e.g. Werner Daum, _Urusfitische Religion_ (Stuttgart: Berlin; Köln; Mainz: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1983); Hildegard Levy, “Origin and Significance of the Māgān Dāvid: A Comparative Study of the Ancient Religions of Jerusalem and Mecca,” _Archiv Orientální_ 18 (1950) 330-365; Ulf Oldenburg, “Above the Stars of El: El in Ancient South Arabian Religion,” _ZAW_ 82 (1970): 187-208; Javier Teixidor, _The Pagan God: Popular Religion in the Greco-Roman Near East_ (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977); Cyrus H. Gordon, “The Daughters of Baal and Allah,” _MW_ 33 (1943): 50-51; Stephanie Dalley, “The God Salmu and the Winged Disk,” _Iraq_ 48 (1986): 85-101.

\(^2\) On the mythological assonance among the three Semitic religions see e.g. A.J. Wensinck, _The Ideas of Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth_ (Afdeeling Letterkunde, 1916); idem, _The Ocean in the Literature of Western Semites_ (Afdeeling Letterkunde, 1918); idem, _Tree and Bird as Cosmological Symbols in Western Asia_ (Afdeeling Letterkunde, 1921).

\(^3\) As John C. Reeves noted ("Preface," in idem [ed.], _Bible and Qur'ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality_ [Leiden: Brill, 2004]) ix) the Qur'ān “places itself within the biblical world of discourse.” See also Daniel A. Madigan, _The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture_ (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001) 193: “What is often overlooked in discussing the relationship of Islam to earlier religious traditions is that the Qur'ān in effect chooses to define itself in their terms.” Wansbrough (Qur'ānic Studies, 20) points out that the Qur'ān establishes its relevance and authority by situating itself fully within the context of 'generic scripture.'
“the legitimate continuator of the Biblical tradition and...the sole heir of the progeny of the Israeliite prophets”. 74

How is one to define the Qur’an’s relation to biblical tradition? We encounter within the former so many biblical characters, themes and parallel narratives that it indeed seems that Islam’s scripture “could not possibly exist without its scriptural predecessors as subtext.” 75 The Qur’an’s “extremely referential nature” can be seen as an acknowledgement of this biblical subtext. That is to say, instead of reproducing biblical narratives the Qur’an often gives a ‘truncated’ version or makes an obscure allusion to a narrative in such a way as to presume on the part of its audience knowledge of the fuller narrative and details. 76 But the parallels are not usually exact or the allusions ‘accurate’ from the perspective of the biblical text. 77 Nineteenth and early twentieth century Orientalists accounted for these divergent parallels by assuming Muhammad’s reliance on Jewish or Christian tutors whose lessons Muhammad received poorly. 78 A newer approach, however, suggests that these ‘biblical materials’ in the Qur’an are indebted to


local oral, intertextual traditions, not the biblical text, and that the Bible and Qur'an both “share and exploit a common layer of discourse”. Underlying such an approach is the insight from the literary-critical study of the Hebrew Bible that the textus receptus (MT) is but one ‘crystallization’ of ancient oral tradition, other ‘crystallizations’ found in the Versions as well as extracanonical, exegetical, and apocryphal biblically affiliated literatures (so-called ‘re-written’ Bibles). All of these crystallizations, including the textus receptus, represent ‘versions of the Bible.’ On this reading, both the Bible and the Qur'an, as well as extracanonical biblically affiliated literatures, are distinct reifications of traditional lore circulating within a shared discourse environment. These studies suggest that the qur'anic divergences from the biblical text evince authentic Jewish and Christian extracanonical lore occasionally preserved only in the Qur'an, rather than Muhammad's having 'gotten it wrong.' It seems clear also that at times the (chronologically) later


83 On 'biblically affiliated literatures' see Talmon “Textual Criticism.”


85 Madigan, The Qur'an's Self-Image, 210: “the way the Qur'an alludes to earlier scriptures has long been recognized as incompatible with actual textual dependence. These allusions reflect, rather, a familiarity with oral tradition, both canonical and extra-canonical. In some cases the allusions may even contain remnants of traditions now lost that were once part of the common stock of Judaic oral literature.” See also Griffith, “The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus,” 134-5; Reuven Firestone, “Comparative
reification, the Qur’an, is in conversation with and even comments on the earlier reifications or crystallizations (the Bible and biblically affiliated literatures). The Qur’an, therefore did not ‘borrow’ from the Bible or biblical literature, rather they both “tap and channel a rich reservoir of traditional lore.”

From a Qu’ânic-Islamic perspective, the Bible and affiliated literature represent imperfect ‘versions of the Qur’an,’ the heavenly Qur’an from which the earthly Qur’an as well as the prior scriptures (Taurât [Torah], Zabur [Psalms], Injil [Gospel]) derived; these are all revealed ‘portions’ of the ‘Mother of the Book,’ Umm al-Kitâb in God’s possession (43:4; cf. 56:78, 85:22). The parallels between the Qur’an and Bible/biblical literature are therefore to be expected due to the texts common origin in this heavenly Qur’an. The discrepancies, on the other hand, are attributed to the imperfect reception history of the two prior ‘communities of the Book,’ which are charged with altering their scriptures. Current literary-critical studies of the Hebrew Bible (hereafter HB)


encourage us to understand 'biblical tradition' as much broader than the canonical Bible and include within it the latter as well as the extracanonical literatures. The Qurʾān apparently agrees. The parallels with biblical materials are more often with extracanonical Jewish and Christian apocrypha and exegetical literature than with the Bible proper,91 and the Qurʾān seems to actually quote the apocryphal Book of Enoch as scripture.92

Thus, whether one privileges the Western or Qurʾānic/Islamic explanation of these parallels, the Bible and Qurʾān are understood as literary concretizations of a shared oral tradition: either traditional lore (Western) or revelatory discourse (qurʾānic). This clarification of the Qurʾān's relation to biblical tradition has great interpretative value.

Hava Lazarus-Yafeh keenly observed that:

it is impossible to understand (Islamic) literature properly without paying serious attention to its various predecessors... One should not think in terms of influences or cultural borrowing only, however. It has been said that the Near East resembles a palimpsest, layer upon layer, tradition upon tradition, intertwined to the extent that one cannot really grasp one without the other, certainly not the later without the earlier, but often also not the earlier without considering the shapes it took later.93

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91 Griffith, “The Gospel, the Qurʾān, and Jesus,” 134-35; Firestone, Journeys, 156; Bernhard Heller, “The Relation of the Aggada to Islamic Legends,” MW 24 (1934): 281 [art. =281-96]; “The Koran... knows less of the Bible than of the Aggada-in fact the Koran sees the Bible in the light of the Aggada”; Julian Obermann, “Islamic Origins: A Study in Background and Foundation,” in Nabil Amin Faris (ed.), The Arab Heritage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944) 94-6: “(Muhammad’s) ‘recounting’ of biblical materials in noncanonical literature so often and so closely that his knowledge of this literature, especially of rabbinical Aggada, would seem to be astonishingly wide, solid, and versatile. Yet, it is out of the question that Muhammad had direct access to the written works of the Aggada or any other branch of postbiblical literature... To the extent...to which (the Koran) ‘recounts’ biblical material and embodies a mass of Jewish and Christian lore, the ultimate sources of its substance must be looked for not in Scripture itself but rather in the postcanonical periphery of Scripture: in the Aggada, the Targum, the Midrash of the Jews, and the apocryphal, patristic, homiletical and liturgical literature of the Christians.” See also idem. “Koran and Aggada.”

92 19:56-57. See Reeves, “Some Explorations,” 44.

93 Lazarus-Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds, 4.
The Bible and Qur'an, as alternative crystallizations of 'biblical tradition,' may therefore shed mutual illuminating light on each other. It will be argued here that, indeed, the biblical and the ancient Near Eastern theophany traditions can shed light on the qur'anic allusions to and later Islamic discussions of theophany and visio Dei.

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94 Sidney H. Griffith ("The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus," 135) has well argued that the intertextual character of the biblical and qur'anic narratives suggests that the Bible's main characters as they function in the several religious communities are not narratively complete either in the Bible or in the Qur'an. These two sources, as well as the earlier extracanonical biblical literature, are all part of the fuller narrative. See also Reeves, "Toward a Rapprochement." On the great possibility of Islamic tradition shedding light on biblical materials see esp. David J. Halperin, "The Hidden Made Manifest: Muslim Traditions and the 'Latent Content' of Biblical and Rabbinic Stories," in David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman and Avi Hurvitz (edd.), Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 581-594.
Chapter II:

Seeing and Not Seeing God in Biblical Tradition

The God of the world’s great religions - all-powerful, all-knowing, invisible, and omnipresent - has been a staple of Western thought for some time. Yet... this God is not the same as the God of most of the Bible, the God who appeared to Abraham, Moses, and other biblical heroes. That God, the ‘God of Old,’ was actually perceived in a very different way...

The God of Old was not invisible or abstract. He appeared to people-usually unexpectedly; He was not sought out. He was not even recognized. Many biblical stories thus center on a ‘moment of confusion,’ in which an encounter with God is first mistaken for an ordinary, human meeting. In the biblical world... the spiritual and the material overlapped: everyday perception was in constant danger of sliding into something else, stark but oddly familiar. God was always standing just behind the curtain of ordinary reality.95

2.1. Deus Invisibilis in the Hebrew Bible?

It is commonly assumed that the God of biblical tradition is incorporeal and (therefore) invisible. J. Behm, writing in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament argued: “In the OT it is a fundamentally alien and impossible thought that God should have a form open to human perception, or that he reveal himself in sensual form.”96 Gerhard von Rad claimed also: “As everywhere attested in the OT, God is intrinsically invisible.”97 In his 1931 study, “Deus Invisibilis: Eine Studie Zur Biblischen Gottesvorstellung,” Erich Fascher set out to show that the New Testament’s θεός οὐκ εἶδον/deus aoratos (Jhn 1:18, 1 Tim 6, 16), which for Fascher is “der Gott, welcher nie zu sehen war und ist und welcher von Menschen aus überhaupt nicht gesehen werden

95 James I. Kugel, the God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible (New York: The Free Press, 2003), front jacket flap.
96 TDNT 4:749 s.v. μηδείς by Behm.
97 TDNT 238 s.v. ענבי in the OT by Von Rad.
kann,”98 is present already in the HB: “Es entspricht der „Transzendenz“ Gottes und dem Deus invisibilis schon im A.T., daß man ihn „hört“, aber nicht „sieht“…”99 This list could go on, 100 though it should not suggest unanimity.101 More recently a number of scholars have suggested that these views are anachronistic. “Clearly modern ambivalence about seeing God is here projected onto the ancient myths” of the HB, which otherwise affirms divine visibility.102 This modern ambivalence is rooted in the Greek philosophic rejection of anthropomorphism,103 and is encountered already in the Greek translation of

98 “the God who was and is never to be seen and who cannot be seen by humans at all.” Erich Fascher, “Deus Invisibilis: Eine Studie Zur Biblischen Gottesvorstellung,” Marburger theologische Studien 1 (1931): 44 [art.=40-77].

99 “It speaks of the ‘transcendent God’ and the Deus Invisibilis already in the Old Testament, whom man ‘hears’ but doesn’t ‘see’…” Ibid., 55.


101 T.K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black (edds.), Encyclopedia Biblica: A Critical Dictionary of the Literary, Political and Religious History, the Archeology, Geography and Natural History of the Bible (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1903) 4:5033 s.v. “Theophany”; “The invisibility of God formed no part of early Hebrew belief”; Rudolf Bultmann, Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting (1956, reprint New York: New American Library, 1974) 22-23: “God is not invisible to the senses as a matter of principle. Indeed, Hebrew has no word for ‘invisible’.”; Helmer Ringgren, Israelite Religion (London: SPCK, 1966), 69: “It is stated a few times that no man can look upon God (Exod. 33:20; Judg. 13:22); but this does not mean that God has no form, but rather that his divinity is so terrible that whoever sees him cannot remain alive (cf. Judg. 6:22; Deut. 3:26). Likewise the statement that God is spirit and not flesh (cf. Isa. 31:3) can hardly mean that God is invisible; it rather indicates that he is totally different from man (cf. Num. 23:19)”; George Fohrer, History of Israelite Religion (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 169: “The statement that no man can see him (Ex.33:20) and that he is spirit, not flesh (Isa.31:3) of course do not mean that he is formless or invisible, but rather that man cannot endure the sight of him (cf. Judge. 13:22) and that, in contrast to transitory flesh, he possesses an eternal vitality.”

102 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Averted Gaze” in idem, God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monothelitism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 69. See also Kugel, the God of Old, 99.

the HB (the Septuagint, hereafter LXX).104 But according to Daniel Boyarin and others, "only under Hellenic influence do Jewish cultures exhibit any anxiety about the corporeality or visibility of God; the biblical and Rabbinic religions were quite free of such influences and anxieties (emphasis original)."105

Boyarin is undoubtedly correct, though he overstates his case. While the Deus philosophorum with its characteristic incorporeality and ontological invisibility is foreign to the biblical tradition,106 some measure of anxiety over visio Dei is not.107 Elliot Wolfson, pointing to the multivocality of the HB, even suggests that "a fundamental tension emerges from the various literary units of the Bible" with respect to the question of anthropomorphism and divine visibility.108 A number of texts appear to be categorical denials of divine visibility (Deut. 4:12, 15-19; Ex. 33:18-23; 1 Kgs 19:9-18), while others seem just as clear in their affirmation (Ex. 24:9-11; Num. 12:8; Isa. 6; 1 Kings 22; Ezek. 1). Thus, Christi Dianne Barnford in her study on "Seeing God in the Hebrew Bible," reasons:

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105 Boyarin, "Eye in the Torah," 533. See also David Stern, "Imitatio Hominis: Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature," Prooftexts 12 (1992): 153; "The first unequivocal evidence in Jewish literature for discomfort with anthropomorphism - that is, the first time that anthropomorphism appears as a problem, as a source of error and misinterpretation - comes only in the early Middle Ages, with Saadiah Gaon and the arrival of a philosophical conception of God predicating the absolute incorporeality, unity, and incomparability of the divine being."


107 See e.g. the early change of הָנָּל to Niph'al in such passages as Exod. 23:15; 34:20 and Deut. 16:16; Carmel McCarthy, Tigquie Sophram and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament (Orbis biblicus et orientalis 36; Friburg [Schweiz]: Universitätsverlag und Ruprecht, 1981) 197-204.


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The reason for much of the confusion is that many different authors and editors from different time periods contributed to the biblical text, and they each had different means of representing God. Any question brought to the text, including the present: "Is it possible to see God?" might turn up numerous different answers, depending upon the tradition consulted.109

The diversity of the traditions represented in the biblical canon must certainly be respected, but the significance of this diversity for our subject seems overstated as well. A more nuanced reading of the relevant passages in their individual contexts do not really suggest "a fundamental tension" over the question of divine visibility. According to Binyamin Uffenheimer, "The dispute between these traditions relates to the question whether it is permitted to see Him, though all are agreed that it is possible to see Him."110 Thus, Deut. 4:12, 15-19, thought to be the origin or at least the clearest articulation of the biblical doctrine of divine invisibility/incorporeality,111 may in fact suggest otherwise: God has a visible form (tēmūnā), which he purposefully concealed behind a cloud of fire and darkness so as not to tempt Israel into idolatry.112 For all their qualifications and

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110 "12 Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form, only a voice...15 Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, 16 so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure...[NOAB modified]" See Bamford, "Seeing God" 38: "the God of the Deuteronomistic tradition is explicitly aniconic, and the reason for the ban on images is that God has no form that has been revealed to mankind [Deut. 4:12, 15];" Wolfson, Through a Spectrum, 14: "The underlying conceptual assumption here [Deut. 4] is clear enough: God possesses no visible form and therefore cannot be worshiped through created images"; Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism," 221: "The classical Deuteronomistic theology of the representation of God, presented most vividly in Deuteronomy 4, precludes the idea that God can be seen at all...The Deuteronomistic theology of God's presence rejects the premise that God has a form (tēmūnā) at all"; Eliezer Berkovits, God, Man and History in Jewish Interpretation (New York: Jonathan David, 1959), 15: "The text (Deut. 4) insists, of course, on the incorporeity of God." On Deut 4 as the origin of the biblical doctrine of divine incorporeality see Baudissin, "Gott schauen," 195-6; Moshe Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972), 191-209. See also Eugen H. Maly, "...The Highest Heavens Cannot Contain You..." (2Kgs 8,27): Immanence and Transcendence in the Deuteronomians," in A Finkel and L. Frizell (edds.), Standing Before God: Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1981) 23-30.

111 "Thus, Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in Diana Vikander Edelman (ed.), The Triumph of Ekstasis: From Rabbinism to Judaism (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996); "For the early audiences, the wholesale denial of all material images of YHWH, whether man-made or naturally occurring is nowhere in view. Rather, the passage addresses the nation's ignorance of, or disregard for, YHWH's proper symbolism according to deuteronomistic standards. As (Deut.) 4:11 reiterates, when the Sinai theophany took place, the people did
restrictions, the Deuteronomists could apparently countenance divine visibility.\textsuperscript{113}

Similarly, passages such as Exod 33:18-23 and 1 Kgs 19:9-18 are better read as qualifications of Yahweh’s visibility rather than categorical denials.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{113} Thus 1 Kings 3:5:9:2 (“Yahweh appeared to Solomon the second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon”); on these theophanies see Fretheim, \textit{Suffering}, 85, Deut. 5:24: “And you (tribal leaders) said: Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us (יהוה) his Glory (INESS), and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have this day seen (יהוה) God speak with man, and he lived”; 4:36: “From the heavens he made his voice heard to chasen you, and on earth he showed you his great fire…” As Ian Wilson has argued (\textit{Out of the Midst of the Fire}, 55-74), this “great fire” (אלהים), which surrounded the divine presence and was associated with the person of Yahweh, probably as the fiery בְּנֵי which surrounded the divine עָנָן (ibid., 74), God is a consuming fire in Deut. 4:24, cf. Isa. 33:14 and according to Ex. 24:17 the בְּנֵי has the appearance of a consuming fire. And the בְּנֵי was “nothing but the material form in which Yahweh was thought to reveal Himself to mortal eyes”; Julian Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” \textit{ZAb} 25 (1911): 140. On early Deuteronomistic countenancing of divine visibility see Cecil P. Staton, Jr., “‘And Yahweh Appeared…” A Study of the Motifs of ‘Seeing God’ and of ‘God’s Appearing’ in Old Testament Narratives” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1988) 289-9; Stephen A. Geller, “Fiery Wisdom: Logos and Lexis in Deuteronomy 4,” \textit{Prophets} 14 (1994): 115; Wilson, loc. cit., 89-96. Geller’s reading of Deut. 4:36 as a deuteronomistic promotion of hearing over a (now) demoted seeing is unlikely: see Macdonald, \textit{Deuteronomy} 192-96; Michael Carasik, “To See a Sound: A Deuteronomistic Rereading of Exodus 20:15,” \textit{Prophets} 19 (1999): 257-76. To be rejected also is Geller’s claim (loc. cit.) that “(Deut. 4) conceives of the fiery aspect of traditions of God in purely physical terms, totally demythologized and devoid of actual theophanic content.” See Wilson, loc. cit. 55-74.

Nor does the ancient Israelite and biblical tradition of aniconism necessarily indicate belief in an invisible/incorporeal deity. Aniconism and anthropomorphism were not mutually exclusive in the West Semitic context. The empty cherubim throne located in

115 Carrol, "Aniconic God," 54: "One explanation interprets the ban on images as a result of a belief in Yahweh’s invisibility. Because the deity is invisible he cannot be represented in concrete or plastic forms. This is a most unlikely explanation because the Old Testament asserts it on the contrary that as part of the Sinaiic covenant process at least seventy representatives of Israel saw the god of Israel (Ex. 24:9-11). The graphic anthropomorphisms used of Yahweh throughout the Old Testament hardly rate invisibility as an important aspect of deity. If he is not an invisible god the ban on images of him cannot be based on his invisibility"; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," in Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (eds.), Christianity in Jewish Terms (Boulder, CO.: Westview, 2000) 242 [art. 239-254]: "This aniconism did not imply the incorporeality of God. One must distinguish between the prohibition of depicting God in images and the claim that God cannot be manifest in a body. One may presume, according to the evidence from the Bible seems to suggest, that God is capable of assuming corporeal form, although that form should not be represented pictorially"; Savran, Encountering the Divine, 48: "Despite the strong aniconic tendencies in biblical religion...there is no shortage of texts describing visual apprehensions of the Deity. Throughout the biblical narrative YHWH is frequently described as having appeared to various personages"; Kugel, the God of Old, 104: "Certainly...the Bible’s prohibition of image making did not derive from any notion that God had no physical form. The God of Old, numerous texts imply, did indeed have some kind of physical being"; Curtiss, "The Theological Basis," 283: "Some have concluded that in this (prohibition of images) ‘God is declared to be a spirit. It is difficult to maintain this view, however, in the light of the strongly anthropomorphic descriptions of God found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible."

116 Theodore J. Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," JAOS 118 (1998) 50; Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism," 212-224; Christoph Uehlinger, "Israelite Aniconism in Context," Bib 77 (1996): 543-45; Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995) Chapt. II, V-VI. While Mettinger gives ample evidence of the coexistence of aniconism and anthropomorphism, he senses a "tension" between them: they are competing traditions or the result of a fusion of different traditions (see e.g. 53, 58, 128; see also idem, "Aniconism: A West Semitic Context for the Israelite Phenomenon?" in Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein [edd.], Ein Gott allein: JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte [OBO 139; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Freiberg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1994] 160, 172). Uehlinger ("Israelite Aniconism") in particular, in his review of Mettinger, has well noted the unproblematischen Nebeneinanders between aniconic stelae and anthropomorphic images. Mettinger responds ("Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins," in van der Toorn, Image and the Book, 199-200) by begging the question; he appeals to his coined definition of de facto aniconism as "tolerant," and therefore able to coexist with its ideological 'other.' But this ideological tension between material aniconism and anthropomorphic statuary is yet to be proven. Two archaeological finds suggest that Mettinger is mistaken. In the temple of 'Ayn Dara (tenth to eighth centuries B.C.E.) a series of four huge human footprints seem to depict the deity entering the temple. As Lewis observes: 'The ancient artisans seem to have striven for an aniconic presence of the deity standing at the entrance to the temple before entering its inner sanctum' ("Divine Images," 40). While the absence of a cult statue may indicate an aniconic cult, the human footprints suggest an anthropomorphist theology. This is confirmed by the numerous reliefs depicting anthropomorphic deities (for illustrations see John Monson, "The New 'Ain
the inner sanctum of the Solomonic Temple hardly suggests an “empty-space aniconism” in which “God was invisibly enthroned as king.” As Wolfson notes:

The fact of the matter...is that there is sufficient textual evidence from the biblical canon to demonstrate that the enthroned Presence of God in the Temple often took the form of visual images and was not restricted to the auditory realm. Thus it was especially in the Temple, the hagios topos, that one beheld God’s countenance.  

That הוהי זבאות יושב הכהרים, “Yahweh of the Hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim” of the Zion-Sabaoth theology of the Jerusalem cult was visible and anthropomorphic is affirmed by both Isaiah 6 and 1 Kings 22:19-23 (2 Chr 18:18-22). Both prophets (Isaiah and Micaiah) claimed: “I saw the Lord sitting on a/his throne”.

The motif of ‘seeing God’ or of God’s ‘appearing’ to man is distributed across the literary units and genres of the Bible. Indeed, as Jean Marcel Vincent pointed out,

Dara Temple: Closest Solomonic Parallel,” BARev 26 (2000): 20-35. Secondly, in the Babylonian king Nabu-apla-iddina’s tablet in the temple of the sun god Shamash in Sippar (9th century B.C.E.) (see L.W. King, Babylonian Boundary Stones and Memorial Tablets [London, 1912] 120), both the anthropomorphic deity and the aniconic sun disc (emblem, standard), the sun disk, are depicted together. Metzinger discusses the latter tablet, but seems not to have understood its full significance for an understanding of West Semitic aniconism.


118 Through a Speculum, 17-18. See also Gerardus van der Lecter, Religion in Essence and Manifestation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 449: “the ark of Jahveh...was an empty throne of God...This of course does not involve any ‘purely spiritual’ worship of God, but merely that the deity should assume his place on the empty throne at his epiphany”; Kagel, the God of Old, 106; What is the message of such empty-space aniconism...? (God) was not represented by an image, not because he did not have a body, however, and not because he could not be seen by people. On the contrary: perhaps making an image of Him was forbidden precisely because the fact of His appearing among human beings, His being revealed, was so crucial...So there were to be no cultic statues; there was only empty space, a designated area. There God could appear and be ‘seen’ in a privileged moment...” See also Walter Beyrin, Origins and History of the Odesa Sinai Traditions (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965) 116-17.

119 On the anthropomorphism of Isaiah 6 see below.

Israel’s visual encounter with her God is fundamental to the origin and understanding of the HB: “das basale Interpretationsgerüst des israelitischen Glaubens aus der Ur-

Erfahrung der Begegnung (Exod. 24) mit dem lebendigen Gott gebildet hat.”¹²¹ The God of Israel was theophanous: he was wont to visibly appear (יָנַה, Niphal of יָנַה)¹²² to certain individuals and, more rarely, groups under special conditions.¹²³ Cecil P. Staton, Jr. summarizes:

Israel's faith was that God appeared to his people and that their life and being was a result of God's direct involvement in her history, particularly with regard to the development, formation, and sustaining of the people and their faith. Yahweh appears to her forefathers with the promises of land, progeny, and blessings; or her forefathers are vouchsafed a vision of God at moments of conflict when divine intervention brings resolution. Yahweh appears to commission and to raise up heroes to deliver the people in times of crisis...Yet in all these events seeing God and the appearing of God are not taken for granted, but recognized as out of the ordinary.¹²⁴

¹²¹ “the basic interpretive framework of Israelite belief formed itself out of the original encounter with the living God (Ex. 24)”: “Aspekte der Begegnung,” 19. See also J. Kenneth Kuntz, The Self-revelation of God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 36: “the faith which Israel artificated presented itself as her own response to a deity that she was given to know via theophanic meeting.”

¹²² THAT 11:760 describes יָנַה as “terminus technicus für das Erscheinen Gottes.” See also Staton, “With regard to persons or objects the Niphal of יָנַה always seems to suggest that the subject appears or is seen...The Niphal of יָנַה is used similarly with God as subject.” 31.; Johannes Lindblom, “Theophanies in Holy Places in Hebrew Religion,” JUCA 32 (1961): 96 n. 8 [art. 91-106]: “The term יָנַה refers the a visionary manifestation of the Deity”.


¹²⁴ Staton, Jr., “‘And Yahweh Appeared...’” 294.
The biblical narrative accounts of theophany\textsuperscript{125} are not to be read figuratively.\textsuperscript{126} “Israel...certainly took the vision of God in a very realistic sense.”\textsuperscript{127} These divine encounters were thought to have “really happened.”\textsuperscript{128} Jeffery Niehaus has demonstrated through form-critical analysis that the biblical theophany narratives partake of the same Gattung (literary-form) as historical accounts of interviews between humans. “Theophanies from the Old Testament and from the ancient Near East are, therefore actually cast in a mode of historical reportage.”\textsuperscript{129} While it is certainly going too far to suggest that this historiographic Gattung “indicates the historical verisimilitude of the theophanies,”\textsuperscript{130} it does confirm that the biblical narrators “regarded (the theophanies) as sober historical fact (emphasis ours).”\textsuperscript{131}

Excursus: Divine Corporeality and Invisibility

It is often taken for granted that invisibility necessarily implies incorporeality. Already Plato equated αοράτος aoratos (invisible) and ασωμάτος asomatōs (incorporeal) (cf. Tim. 46d, 36c).\textsuperscript{132} Hellenistic Judaism and Patristic Christianity inherited this Platonic conflation.\textsuperscript{133} For Philo of Alexandria (first century C.E.) the divine essence is both αοράτος and ασωμάτος (Vita M. I, 158; Mut. Nom. 7)\textsuperscript{134} and Origen (d. 254 C.E.) cites John 4:24 (“God

\textsuperscript{125} On theophanies in narrative vs. poetic contexts see Savran, Encountering the Divine, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{126} Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism,” 31; Eilberg-Schwartz, God’s Phallus, 72, 116.


\textsuperscript{128} Niehaus, God at Sinai, 39: “theophanic accounts—both biblical and extrabiblical-purpos: to tell about something that really happened, that is, they appear to be historical.”

\textsuperscript{129} Niehaus, God at Sinai, 43-4.

\textsuperscript{130} Niehaus, God at Sinai, 43.

\textsuperscript{131} Encyclopaedia Biblica, 4:5036 s.v. Theophany. On the narrative context of OT theophanies, as opposed to the mythological formulations of other ancient Near Eastern peoples, see also Muehlenburg, “Speech of Thropany,” 37.

\textsuperscript{132} As Cécile Blanc (“Dieu est pneuma. Le sens de cette expression d’après Origène,” SStP 16 [1985]: 227) notes: “...les deux termes qualifient ensemble une même réalité veritable, opposée au devenir, qui est corporel, visible et palpable.”

\textsuperscript{133} On the pre-Platonic distinction see below.

\textsuperscript{134} See Blanc “Dieu est pneuma,” 228 who notes that, “C’est sans doute sous l’influence se Platon qu’il associe fréquemment... αοράτος et ασωμάτος...” On Philo’s nuanced view of incorporeality see John
is spirit”) as evidence of God’s incorporeality and therefore invisibility. However, an older Greek (and, as we shall see, Hebrew) view made no such necessary connection. A being or object could be both οὐκομάτος (corporeal) and ὄρατος (invisible) at the same time. In Classical Greek invisibility is normally affected by materially obstructing visibility. Thus, in the Homeric poems and in Hesiod invisibility is “(o)fien described in terms of a ‘covering’ or ‘clothing’”, usually by a cloud, mist, or storm:

The early Greeks, in describing invisibility, attribute it to a visible, but tenuous, agency (cloud, mist, etc)... For that which renders unseen in Homer and Hesiod is a covering material, which is external to the concrete body (emph. orig.).

Classical Greek notions of divine invisibility therefore affirmed rather than denied corporeality.

the gods have a body that they can at will make (or keep) totally invisible to mortal eyes—
and it does not cease to be a body... In order to manifest his presence, the divinity chooses to make himself visible in the form of a body, rather than his body. From a divine perspective, the opposition visibility/invisibility is no longer entirely pertinent. Even in the framework of an epiphany, the god’s body may appear to be perfectly visible and recognizable to one of the spectators while remaining, at the same time and in the same place, completely hidden to the eye of others (emph. orig.).

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136 Arthur Stanely Pease, “Some Aspects of Invisibility,” Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 49 (1942): 10-11 notes: “Man’s invisibility may occur...as a result of concealment in mist or dust, natural or artificial-like the modern smokescreen—, in a tempest of wind or rain, during a solar eclipse, into darkness, in fire, into water, in fissures in the earth, by putting to sleep or temporary blinding of ones enemies, by simply slipping away and evading ones companions, or by methods not clearly stated, and hence...mysterious.”


The later development of the notion of incorporeal invisibility went hand-in-hand with the philosophic rejection of Homeric anthropomorphism. This rejection is especially associated with the Greek author Xenophanes (fifth century B.C.E.), whose “pioneering for a purer conception of God” laid the foundation for the development of the transcendent, incorporeal deity of theism. And as Th. Kortweg has shown, this rejection of anthropomorphism was catalytic to the emergence of the philosophic θεός aoratos, Deus aoratos. This deity is best summed up in Maximus of Tyre’s Eleventh Discourse, Who is God according to Plato? Informing his audience of the nature (φυσις) of the invisible deity (θεσ…aoratos ophalmois XI 9b) Maximus wrote:

He is the Mind which is Father and Maker of All… “The divine is invisible to the eyes, unspeakable with the voice, unctouchable with the flesh, unknown to the hearing; only by the most beautiful, most pure, most intellectual…aspect of the soul is it seen through its likeness and heard through its kinship, the whole together being present to the whole understanding…” God has no size, no color, no form, nor any other accident of matter, but he has a beauty unlike any other beauty (9 c-d; II e).

There is no Hebrew equivalent to the Greek aoratos. The latter appears in the LXX three times: it translates מִן in MT Gen. 1:2, which describes the chaotic state of the pre-cosmic earth; it translates מָהָרָם in Isa. 45:3, a description of riches divinely hidden in secret places; in II Macc. 9:5 it describes the ‘blow’ or sickness with which God struck

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139 On the philosophic critique of Homeric anthropomorphism see above n. 103.

140 Jaeger, Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers, 45.


143 Quoted from Young, “God of the Greeks,” 49-50.

144 TDNT 5:368 n. 4. s.v. ophatoς, aoratος by Michaelis.
Antiochus. But as Cécile Blanc observes, "Il n’y a pas d’exemple où il (i.e. ἀοράτος) se rapporte à Dieu."\(^{145}\)

Arthur Stanley Pease, in his discussion ‘Some Aspects of Invisibility,’ assumed that the prophet Isaiah, when he speaks of מַשֵּׁתָר מֵאָל, ‘el mistatēr, “God who hides himself” (Isa. 45:15), is speaking of the incorporeal θεὸς ἄορατος, Deus aoratos.\(^{146}\) But as Samuel E. Balentine has shown, Yahweh’s hastārāt or hiding in the HB refers, not to any ontological invisibility, but inactivity in history as a consequence of Israel’s violation of the covenant.\(^{147}\) According to Richard Friedman, this divine hiddenness also involves “the continuing diminishing apparent presence of Yahweh among humans.”\(^{148}\) Friedman traces this diminution from Yahweh’s active and visible involvement with humanity in the Garden (Gen. 1-3), through the patriarchal theophanies (where specific individuals, rather than communities, encounter ‘a sort of emanation from the Godhead that is visible to human eyes’ [13]), through the post-Mosaic prophetic period of divine encounters in dreams and visions, to Elijah’s experience on Mt. Horeb and ‘the deity’s blatant refusal to appear as before’ (1 Kgs. 19:11, 12)\(^{149}\). “The period of visible, audible encounters with the divine gradually passes, not subtly, but expressly in the text.”\(^{150}\) Friedman’s schema may

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\(^{145}\) “There is no example where (ἀοράτος) refers to God”: “Dieu est pnaoma,” 228. See also Michaelis, \textit{TDNT} 5:368 s.v. ὀράτος, ἀοράτος: “God is not called ἀοράτος.”

\(^{146}\) “Some Aspects of Invisibility,” 4.


\(^{149}\) Friedman, “Hiding the Face,” 218.

\(^{150}\) Friedman, \textit{Hidden Face of God}, 16.
be more systematic than the texts actually support, but it is clear that the biblical *Deus absconditus* is not the same as the *Deus philosophorum* who is *Deus aoratos*.

### 2.2. Transcendent Anthropomorphism and Divine (In)visibility

Like the gods of her ancient Near Eastern neighbors, the god(s) of Israel were transcendentally anthropomorphic; that is to say, he/they possessed bodies so sublime it they bordered on the non-body.\(^{151}\)

Yahweh has a body, clearly anthropomorphic, but too holy for human eyes... Yahweh’s body was believed to be incommensurate with mundane human existence: it has a different degree of being than human bodies... It is a transcendent anthropomorphism not in form but in its effect, approachable only by the most holy, and absent in material form in the cult... The body of God was defined in Israelite culture as both like and unlike that of humans.\(^{152}\)

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\(^{152}\) Hendel, “Aniconism and Anthropomorphism,” 223, 225. See also H. Wheeler Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” in Arthur S. Peake (ed.), *The People and the Book: Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925) 367. “The majestic figure seen by Isaiah in the temple is in human form, though endowed with superhuman qualities. If we ask for further definition, we shall find that the ‘glory’ of Yahweh, His full visible manifestation, is conceived in terms of dazzling and unbearable light. Yahweh’s body is shaped like man’s, but its substance is not flesh but ‘spirit,’ and spirit seen as a blaze of light. It is true that the imageless worship of prophetic religion repudiates the making of any likeness of God, and no form was seen in the storm-theophany of Sinai (Deut. iv. 12). But it is one thing to shrink from the vision of the form, and another to deny that a form exists, though a form wrought out of rāsh-substance”; van der Toorn, “God (1) הלאה,” 361f. “The Israelite concept of God shares many traits with the beliefs of his neighbors. The most
The body of the gods shines with such an intense brilliance that no human eye can bear it. Its splendor is blinding. Its radiance robs it of visibility through an excess of light, the way darkness causes invisibility through a lack of light...if the god chooses to be seen in all his majesty, only the tiniest bit of the splendor of the god’s size, stature, beauty and radiance can be allowed to filter through, and this already enough to strike the spectator with thamnos, stupefaction, to plunge him into a state of reverential fear. But to show themselves openly, as they truly are – emargeš – is a terrible favor the gods accord no one...  

This ‘awe-inspiring luminosity’ of the deities is in Akkadian termed pulḫu melamμā (Sum. ni-melum), an hendiadys meaning ‘fear, glory’. This, as A. Leo Oppenheim told us in a seminal article, denotes a dazzling aureole or nimbus surrounding a divinity. The pulḫu or pulḫtu is often described as a supernatural garment of fire and flame. The ancient and ubiquitous garment-as-body metaphor is certainly operative here, as

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*pulḫu/pulḫtū* is equated with the Sumerian *ni* “body, corporeal shape.”

The *melammā* is associated with some sort of sparkling head-wear, like a crown or even a luminous mask. According to E. Cassin the *melammā* is better understood as the expression of a vital force in the form of pulsating light. *pulḫu melammā* is the terrible epiphanic glory of the gods. Its radiance overwhelmed enemies on the battlefield: “the awe-inspiring splendor of Aššur, my Lord, overwhelmed the men”; “the effulgence of his surpassing glory consumed them.” Even deities seek shelter from the radiant splendor of the greater gods: “O my Lady (Inanna), the Anunnā, the great gods, /Fluttering like bats fly off before you to clefts [in the rock], /They who dare not walk [?] in your terrible glance, who dare not proceed before your terrible countenance.”

Theirs is “A body invisible in its radiation, a face that cannot be seen directly.” To catch a glimpse of a deity could mean death for a human onlooker, because the mortal constitution is unable to bear it. In order to be seen when such is desired or necessary, or in order to intervene directly in human affairs, the gods must conceal their divine

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163 Oppenheim, “Akadian *pulḫu/pulḫtū* and *melammā*,” 31-33.

164 *Splendour Divine*, 79ff.

165 Oppenheim, “Akadian *pulḫu/pulḫtū* and *melammā*,” 32: “Thus the attire of the gods in their primary epiphanies was composed of *pulḫu* (or *pulḫtū*) as garment and of a *melammā* as head-gear.”


168 Quoted from Weinfeld (*TDOT* 7:29-30) s.v. *kāḇōḏ* [V. Divine Glory in the Ancient Near East] 30 who notes: “The terrible countenance is that of the goddess, it beams forth radiance and splendor like that of the god Nanna, whose face is full of radiance (sag-ki.bi me-lām-gāl-gim).”


forms. Concealment is achieved either by enveloping the divine body in a mist, fog or cloud to become invisible, or by some sort of divine metamorphosis. This latter is usually done by reducing the divine size and splendor and taking on the appearance of a mortal human.

The God of the biblical canon also has a dangerously luminous and fiery body, called in some sources his כָּבֹד, kāḇōd. In the priestly material (P and Ezekiel) in particular kāḇōd yhwh denotes Yahweh’s radiant human form, “with the strongest possible emphasis on God as light.” The fire that emanates from כָּבֹד יְהֹוָה is dangerous: it

171 Vernant, “Dim Body,” 37: “The paradox of the divine body is that in order to appear to mortals, it must cease to be itself; it must cloak itself in a mist, disguise itself as a mortal, take the form of a bird, a star, a rainbow.”


A number of scholars have sought to distance Ezekiel’s anthropomorphic kāḇōd from P’s ‘abstract’ kāḇōd (e.g. Israel Knohl, The Sanctuary of Silence: the Priestly Torah and the Holiness School [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995] 128-137). Eichrodt, Theology, 2:32 understood P’s kāḇōd to be “a formless brightness of light” and Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 1-154 assumed that the kēbōd yhwh of P, other than being ‘something like fire’ enveloped in the ‘cloud of Jawhe’, has no particular shape (See also Schmid, “Gottesbild, 251”): Yahweh’s fire was amorph.) But these claims are based on the false assumption that P’s theology is ant-anthropomorphist, an assumption which is to be rejected (see above). Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 200f. is surely correct: “Corporeal representation of the Deity in the Priestly document found its clearest expression in the conception of the ‘Glory of God’, against which the book of Deuteronomy promulgated its doctrine of ‘God’s Name.’ The underlying imagery of the concept of God’s Glory (כָּבֹד יְהֹוָה), ‘the Kāḇōd of Yahweh,’ embedded in Priestly tradition is drawn from corporeal and not

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consumes whatever it touches. Like the pulhu melamnu of the Mesopotamian deities, the flames of the נבוב זכה can be unleashed on Jahweh’s enemies. To look upon יהוה was deadly: the brightness was too much for the mortal eye. To abide with Israel, but not consume her, Jahweh, like the Homeric and Hesiodic deities, cloaks his fiery עון/עון השם with a black cloud.

177 See also Woltoč, Through a Speculum (23 n. 55): “while it is fair enough to contrast Ezekiel’s depiction of the glory with that of the Priestly authorship, it seems to me that the anthropomorphic understanding of the glory is not completely innovated by Ezekiel. Indeed, the narrative in Exod. 33:18ff. already suggests such a conception.”


179 Exod. 33:17-23 and below. See also Morgenstern, Fire Upon the Altar, 16: “They (i.e. priestly editors of the Pentateuch) still had perforce to conceive of him as a fiery apparition, of such extreme radiance that for any mortal to gaze upon Him even inadvertently, or even to cast unduly into his presence, meant death.”


181 Niehaus, God at Sinai, 28: “He chooses to garb himself in a thick cloud because a full revelation of his holy presence would destroy the onlooker”; Beker Encyclopedia of the Bible 2:1695-6 s.v. Pillar of Fire and Cloud: “Because the radiance and splendor of God are so overwhelming, because no man can look on him and live (Ex 33:17-23; Jn 1:18; 6:46; I Th 4:15, 16), that splendor is concealed within the cloud to protect man from his presence (Ex 16:10; 19:16-20; 24:15-17; Ps 18:11; 12; 97:2,3); TDOT 7:31 s.v. נבוב by Weinfeld: “In P and Ezekiel the קָבָּד of Yahweh is concealed as a blazing fire surrounded by a cloud. The cloud is an indispensable element of theophany. It serves as a cloak to protect against the mortal viewing of the deity”; Gerhard von Rad, “Deuteronomy’s ‘Name’ Theology and the Priestly Document’s ‘Kabod’ Theology,” in idem, Studies in Deuteronomy (trans. David Stalker; Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1953) 39; “The phenomenon of the נבוב, which emits a brightness too great for the human eye to look upon, is enveloped by the cloud by means of which Jahweh himself graciously protects men from being destroyed by
or punish one of his own, he thrusts aside the cloud, exposing them to his undimmed radiance. 182

2.2.1. Anthropomorphism and Theophany

Recognizing the fundamental anthropomorphism of the ancient Israelite and biblical deity is important for understanding the biblical tradition of theophany. It does not seem to be the case that "The form of the appearance of deity varies in many of the theophanies." 183 Rather, "The God whom Israel worships appears, if he wills to appear at all, in living human likeness. Anthropomorphism in the strict sense, in the sense of the appearance of God in human shape, depends for Israel in the earliest stages we can trace on the memory of the ancestors and the meeting of their God with them." 184 The ancient Near Eastern background to biblical theophany 185 and anthropomorphism makes it unlikely that this human form is a "momentarily assumed theophanic form." 186


184 Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism," 38. See also Fretheim, Suffering of God, 93; "It is probable that all the theophanies were in human form, though it is perhaps more true to the evidence to say that there are no theophanies which are incompatible with an appearance in human form."

185 Stanton, Jr. "And Yahweh Appeared," 103; "It is therefore very likely that Israel's confession that God is seen belongs to the common heritage of the ancient Near East." See also Niehaus, God at Sinai; Schmidt and Nel, "Theophany as type-scene," 262-3; Mann, Divine Presence and Guidance, Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic, 147-94; Jeremias, Theophanies, 73-90; Westermann, Praise and Lament, 93-4.

mention in Num. 12:8 of the רָאוֹת יָהֹウェָה təmūnāt yhwh (cf. Ps. 17:15) or "(visible) form of Yahweh" suggests a permanent divine form, no doubt anthropomorphic.

This suggestion is not contradicted by such passages as Gen 15 and Exod 3. The latter, Yahweh’s commissioning of Moses from the burning bush, likely involves an implicit anthropomorphic theophany. Gen 15, on the other hand, the so-called Covenant Between the Pieces, probably doesn’t describe an actual theophany at all. Vv. 9-12,17 describe a covenant rite between Yahweh and Abram in which the latter cuts in half certain animals fit for sacrifice. Thereafter, the patriarch is made to fall into a

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He is indeed seen in human form (e.g. Gn. 18), yet there is no suggestion that this form is anything but a form which Yahweh has assumed for the sake of a temporary manifestation. Even Barth ("Theophany and Anthropomorphism," 32) speaks of God “assuming” the human form during theophanies.

187 יָהֹウェָה by Waschke: "Die Grundbedeutung ist an allen Stellen „sichtbare Gestalt"."

188 Ohmann, “‘Theophany’ in the Old Testament,” 7.


190 Bernard P. Robinson, “Moses at the Burning Bush,” JSOT 75 (1997): 116-117 [art. =107-122]: “More probably...the idea (in Exod. 3:6) is that the messenger is in the flame. The messenger will, as elsewhere, be thought of as appearing in human form. He is recognized as God’s envoy by the flame that surrounds him. I agree...that 3:6, ‘Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God’, most naturally suggests that there was in the bush a messenger in human shape, clothed in fire, rather than merely a flame”; Fretheim, Suffering, 95: “The use of the messenger language here makes it clear that the flame of fire is not to be identified as the form of the divine self-manifestation, but only as a veil or envelope for the human form of the divine appearance (see also Exod. 19:18; Deut 4:12, 15). Ezekiel 1:26-28 speaks in comparable ways about the relationship between the fire ‘round about’ and the ‘likeness as it were of a human form.' See further Cornelis Houtman, Exodus, 3 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 1:338-339. Pace Hamori, “‘When Gods Were Men,’” 134; Schmid, “Gottesbild,” 251 (who assumed the fire of Yahweh was ‘amorph’); Encyclopedia Biblica, 4:5034 s.v. Theophany, IDB 4:619 s.v. Theophany by G. Henton Davies. On the anthropomorphic ‘angel of the Lord’ here see Thomas L. Thompson’s observation, “The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative: Inclusive Monotheism in Persian Period Palestine,” in Edelman, Triumph of Elohim, 117-18 [art. =107-24]: “The narrative as such loses meaningful plot coherence, unless in this composite theophany of tradition the three numina, הָיוֹשֵׁב (God), יָהֹウェָה (angel of the Yahweh) and יָהֹウェָה (Yahweh) are understood as identical: the one god of Israel.” See also idem, “How Yahweh became God: Exodus 3 and 6 and the Heart of the Pentateuch,” JSOT 68 (1995): 57-74; Aleida G. Van Daalen, “The Place Where YHWH Showed Himself to Moses: A Study of the Composition of Exodus 3,” in Martin Kessler (ed.), Voices From Amsterdam. A Modern Tradition of Reading Biblical Narrative (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) 133-144; R.P. Carroll, “Strange Fire: Abstract of Presence Absent in the Text. Meditations on Exodus 3,” JSOT 61 (1994): 39-58, esp. 41-49. On the divine identity of the נַאַלְּקָח yhwh in the HB see below.

191 On Gen 15:17-18 as a theophany see IDBSup, 896-898 s.v. Theophany in the OT by J. Jeremias.

192 A three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, and a three-year-old ram.
In what is likely a symbolic dream/vision Abram sees “a smoking oven (הַמּוֹר) and flaming torch (אֲדָמָד) which passed between these (animal) parts (v. 17).” Commentators have associated this smoking fire-pot and flaming torch with Yahweh’s fiery manifestation. However, the text does not support seeing these cultic instruments as an actual Erscheinungform. The formulaic “and Yahweh appeared unto...יָהָ֣ו נַחֲלַ֖ת אֲלֵ֣יכָּם” is absent and, as Kenneth Kantz perceived, “the Yahwist is obviously reluctant to suggest a simple equation” between Yahweh and the instruments.

What is reported in vv. 9-12, 17 is not an ‘historical’ encounter with the divine, as in the case of theophanies, but likely a dream-vision, specifically a symbolic dream-


194 See especially the arguments of Diana Lipton, Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis (JSOTSup 288; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) Chapter Five and further Shaul Bar, A Letter That Has Not Been Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 25; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2001) 146-156.


199 Self-revelation of God, 119. See also Herman Gunkel, Genesis: Translated and Interpreted (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997) 181. “one should note how carefully the narrator speaks. He does not say directly that this epiphany is Yahweh, but merely gives the impression. Even Abraham did not see Yahweh’s form itself” and Fowler, “Visual Anthropomorphic Revelation of God,” 63: “Verse 17 does not say explicitly that it was God who passed between the parts; one is left to assume so only because of the covenant-making custom (emph. orig.).”

200 On theophany narratives and biblical historiography see above nn. 125-28.
vision. As such, the imagery would be symbolic. As Shaul Bar puts it, “These symbols are the emissaries of the Lord and signs of His presence.” The symbolic quality of the imagery is further suggested by the nature of the rite depicted. While there is no consensus among commentators on the meaning of this rite, if it is in fact to be read in the light of Jer 34:18-19 then we at the very least are dealing with some sort of substitution rite: the dismembered animals and the cultic implements are symbolic substitutes for the two covenant parties. The animal pieces as symbols of potential covenant breakers or the vulnerable descendants of Abraham may substitute for either the divine or the human party. The smoking oven and flaming torch, on the other hand, could only represent Yahweh. In any case, we have to do here with symbolic substitution, not identity.

Nor is it likely that the ‘Pillar of Fire and Cloud’ characteristic of the Wilderness narrative is an example of a non-anthropomorphic Erscheinungsform. Yahweh appears in the Pillar of Fire and Cloud (בֶּטֶלה חָגוּן, beth local) not as the Pillar of Fire and Cloud

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201 *IDB* 4:619 s.v. Theophany by G. Henton Davies: “the vision of the word of the Lord (15:1), the deep sleep (vs. 12), and the pot and torch symbolism (vs. 17) remove the story from the category of theophany.”


207 Ha, *Genesis 15*, 74.

208 *Pace* *IDB* 4:619 s.v. Theophany by G. Henton Davies; *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 4:5034 s.v. Theophany; Fowler, “The Visual Anthropomorphic Revelation,” 112.

The cloud seems rather to be like a tent in which the divine radiance abides, or a garment in which it is cloaked. In other words, "the pillar itself is not a form of the divine manifestation, but envelops a form of God...Consequently, it is not the pillar of fire or smoke/cloud which is thought to be a speaking form of God; rather, God in human form speaks from within such surroundings," as do the Classical deities.


211 Cf. Ps. 18:11-12 (Heb. 12:13)=2 Sam. 22:13; “He made darkness (הָעַד) his covering around him, his tent (מֶשֶךְ) thick clouds (תֹּפָה יָדוּעַ) dark with water. 12 (13) Out of the brightness (יָדוּעַ) before him there broke through the clouds hailstones and coals of fire (NOAB trans., modified).” See further *TDOT* 1:371-75 s.v. שלג yāgel by Mulder, *TDNT* 4:904 s.v. נָחַל by Oepke; ‘The cloud is the tent in which the deity conceals himself.’

On the cloud/garment association see Job 38:9: "When I made clouds its garments, and thick darkness its swaddling band (NOAB). Here, clouds (נָחַל) and thick darkness (רַכָּב) are parallel and are described as a garment (מֶשֶךְ) and swaddling band (מַשֶּׁל). On this black cloud/black garment association in biblical and rabbinic tradition see further H. Torczyner, “The Firmament and the Clouds: Rāqîh and Shehāqîm,” *SR* 1 (1948): 188-96. According to Freedman and Willoughby, *TDOT* 1:255 s.v. נָחַל ‘anān, the theophanic cloud motif as found in Exodus “is rooted in the ancient tradition of describing God as wrapped in a cloak of clouds or light.” In Rev. 10:1 the garment of the angel of revelation is a cloud. See further *TDNT* 4:902-10 s.v. נָחַל by Oepke.

212 Fretheim, *Suffering*, 95-6. See also Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 1:154: “these pillars of cloud and fire are not the form in which Yahweh reveals Himself to mortals. They are merely the envelope or cloak in which Jehovah has shrouded Himself, so that his actual, sacred presence shall not be seen by human eye. Jehovah is in the two pillars, but is not the two pillars themselves”; Barr, “Anthropomorphism and Theophony,” 35: “Yahweh is veiled from sight by being in the ‘ammut he-'anān.”
2.3. Exodus 33: Divine Visibility and Human Peril

Yahweh’s characteristic *Erscheinungsform* is therefore anthropomorphic,\(^{214}\) and modern commentators should probably not overly stress the distinction between *Deus revelatus* and *God als er selbst*.\(^ {215}\) The God of Israel, like the deities of the ANE generally, was a divine *anthropos*\(^ {216}\) whose morphic transcendence imperils man.\(^ {217}\) Revelation (גַּלְגָּל), which often entails Yahweh’s visual self-disclosure (גַּלְגֶּל),\(^ {218}\) therefore of necessity “involves the

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\(^{214}\) Besides Fretheim and Barr see also Dearman, “Theophany, Anthropomorphism, and the *Imago Dei*,” 34: “Not all the accounts of theophany give an indication of bodily form in their reference to God ‘appearing’, but when they do, it is a human form rather than animal form that is indicated”; J. Maxwell Miller, “In the ‘Image’ and ‘Likeness’ of God,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 292 [art. 289-304]: “the theophanic tradition is perhaps the clearest evidence that this view (anthropomorphism) existed among the people of Israel. The biblical writers were extremely cautious, of course, when describing God’s theophanies, usually giving more attention to the surroundings of his appearance than to God himself. It is altogether clear from their descriptions, however, that God’s bodily form was understood to be essentially like that of a man”; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962) 227: all “God’s theophanic appearances occur consistently in human form”; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 16-24; Eilberg-Schwarz, “The Averted Gaze” 116; Lindblom, “Theophanies,” 106.

\(^{215}\) Kuntz, *Self-Revelation of God*, 38: “Now the Hebrew... did not call into question the genuine character of God’s appearances in the world. Nor may we suggest that the Semitic mentality was amenable to affirming that Yahweh had two distinct natures, one hidden, the other revealed. Indeed, the self-disclosures of Israel’s God are fraught with an unresolved tension between the hidden and the revealed. The theophany... Yahweh’s presence is quite real.” See also Fretheim, *Suffering*, 105: “the human form of the divine appearance constituted an enlightenment which bore essential continuities with the form which God was believed to have (emphasis original).”

\(^{216}\) Smith, *Early History of God*, 144 (= idem, *Origins*, 90): “The use of dêmnīt, ‘likeness,’ and yēlém, ‘image,’ in Gen. 1:26-28 presupposes the vision of the anthropomorphic god...Genesis 1 achieves the opposite effect of Ezekiel 1:26. While Ezekiel 1:26 conveys the prophet’s vision of Yahweh in the likeness of the human person, Genesis 1 presents a vision of the human person in the likeness of the divine”; Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*: 1:145-6: “Actually, Israel conceived even Yahweh himself as having human form...but the way of putting it which we use runs in precisely the wrong direction according to Old Testament ideas, for, according to the ideas of Yahwism, it cannot be said that Israel regarded God anthropomorphically, but the reverse, that she considered man as theomorphic...It has been rightly said that Ezek. 1.26 is the theological prelude to the *locus classicus* for the imago doctrine in Gen. 1.26...nevertheless at the same time an infinite difference and distance is tacitly recognized first in the matter of mere stature, for Israel conceived Yahweh as gigantic (Mic. 1.3ff; Is. LXIII. 3ff; Ps. XXIV. 9), but also different and distant as regards quality, for the גַּלְגָּל which man has cannot, of course, be remotely compared with the fiery, intensely radiant light which is the nature of Yahweh...Yahweh himself was conceived as man.” On the epithet “man (נָע) and “mighty man (רֹאשָׁה) used of God see Gen. 18: 32:24-30; Ex. 15:3; 33:11; Isa 54:4; Hos 2:18; Ps. 24:7-10; 78:65; Isa. 42:13; Zeph. 1:14; 3:17; Jer. 20:11; 1QM, xii, 9-10; 1QM, xiv, 2; Marmerstein Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, 7ff, 65ff; J. Massingberd Ford, “The Epipheth ‘Man’ for God,” The Irish Theological Quarterly 38 (1971): 72-76; T *DOT* 1:230-33 s.v. נָע, ה’ *Yśḥāk* by N.P. Brättströms and Michael Chernick; ibid., 2:373-77 s.v. גַּלְגָּל *gābhār* V. gībhor, by Hans Kosmala.

\(^{217}\) Isa 6, Ez 1.

gracious suspension of the nominal threat.”\textsuperscript{219} Such a “suspension” seems to be illustrated in the important passage Exod 33:18-23:

18. (Moses) Said: “Show me your Glory (גְּדַרְכָּהָּ), I pray you”
19. And (Yahweh) said: I will make my goodness (רָצִיב) pass before you, and will proclaim my name, ‘Yahweh’; and I will be gracious to whom I will, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”
20. “But,” he said, “you cannot see my face (לֹא נַא בִּי לָרְאָה אֱלֹהִים); for no one can see Me and live (כִּי לֹא יְרָא את ה' וְיֵשׁ).
21. And Yahweh continued: “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock;
22. And while my Glory (גְּדַרְכָּה) passes by I will put you in a cleft of rock, and I will cover you with my hand (ָּדוֹד) until I have passed by;
23. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back (אֲחָזִים); but my face shall not be seen (גְּדַרְכָּה לֹא יְרָא).

James Barr described this passage as “the most sophisticated and delicate discussion of the seeing of God by man in the OT.”\textsuperscript{220} Though vv. 20 and 23b are sometimes taken as categorical denials of divine visibility,\textsuperscript{221} 21-23a clearly state that, if Yahweh’s face, pānim, was not to be seen, something of the divine person, the ‘āhôr, was. The question, of course, is what do these terms imply in this pericope and what does it mean to be able to see one and not the other? For reasons of space we will not enter the complex literary-critical discussion on chapter 33, or the larger narrative unit, chapters 32-34,\textsuperscript{222} though

\textsuperscript{219} Harrop, “‘Now Mine Eyes Seeth Thee’,” 82. See also Berkovits, God, Man and History, 32, 33, 34: “The Divine Presence imperils man; not on account of God’s will, directed against man, but because divine nature is so charged with primordial forcefulness and vitality of being that its nearness naturally overwhelms all individual existence…The Paradox is resolved by God, when He ‘shows’ Himself to man. God, who reveals His ‘unbearable’ Presence to the helpless creature, also sustains man in the act of revelation…All protection, however, that shields the prophet hides God from him. God can only reveal Himself to man by hiding Himself in the very act of revelation. In the peril, which is implied—and yet restrained—in the encounter, God reveals and hides Himself in one…He reveals Himself as the ‘hiding’ God that man may live in His sight.”

\textsuperscript{220} Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism,” 35.

\textsuperscript{221} IDB 2:419 s.v. God, OT view of.

we admit with a number of scholars that the former must be read in the context of the latter.\textsuperscript{223} We also accept with most commentators that 33:18-23 is an ancient, independent tradition, having no original connection with the other tradition units isolated from Exodus 33 (vv. 1-6, 7-11, 12-17), but our focus here will be on what the later redactor may have intended by bringing these units together in this canonical form.\textsuperscript{224} Specifically, what does he intend by Yahweh’s rebuff to Moses: לא יראוに יְהוָה וּבָא נִצָּא (v. 20). In this regard, Julian Morgenstern, in his study “Biblical Theophanies,” cautioned as: “To rightly understand the narrative (Exod. 33) it must be studied carefully in the light of the principles of theophany in the O.T.”\textsuperscript{225} Since, as Frank Polak noted, “The theophany theme dominates the entire book of Exodus,”\textsuperscript{226} Morgenstern’s point is well taken. What light does the larger theophanic tradition shed on this “most profound and mysterious” passage?\textsuperscript{227}

It is important to point out first that danger associated with seeing the deity as a common biblical theme (Gen. 32:30; Exod. 19:21; 24:11; Judg. 6:23; 13:22).\textsuperscript{228} But the issue here is not divine visibility or invisibility, but divine holiness. “The belief that one cannot see God and live is best understood as a motif of Israelite folklore, rooted in

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\textsuperscript{224} So Childs, \textit{Book of Exodus}, 586: “the decisive stage in the formation of the chapter (viz. 33) stems from the redactor’s hand, rather than from existing sources.”

\textsuperscript{225} Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” I:171.


\textsuperscript{227} Moberly’s characterization of 33:18-23: \textit{At the Mountain}, 80.

\textsuperscript{228} J. Jeremias even suggested, “Normative for the OT are the words: ‘Man shall not see me and live’; \textit{IDBSip}, 897 s.v. Theophany in the OT.
popular conceptions concerning purity and danger.” Yahweh’s holiness is violently incompatible with impurity and sin, and thus, direct encounters with the divine always put mortals at risk.

Die Unvereinbarkeit von Gott und Sünde wird fast im Sinne eines Automatismus gedacht, der alles, was der Heiligkeit Gottes entgegensteht, in dessen Nähe ausgerottet sein läßt.

Auf diesem Hintergrund ist auch zu sehen, daß jeder Kontakt mit dem Heiligen als Gefahr betrachtet wird, weil Verfehlungen und Vergehen zur sofortigen Vernichtung führen müssen. Da in biblischer Vorstellung das Sehen immer eine unmittelbare Erfahrung bedeutet, wird das Sehen auch und gerade in diesem Kontext der besonderen Nähe zum Heiligen problematisiert.

Exod. 33:18-33 equates Yahweh’s כָּבֹד kāḇōd with his פָּנִים pānim. Thus, while the latter has a range of meanings in the biblical text, its synonymy here with Yahweh’s fiery, anthropomorphic כָּבֹד means that the mortal danger associated with seeing the

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229 Hendel, “Anticonism and Anthropomorphism,” 221. Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 22-23: “God is invisible because he wills to be so. To see God would be to die... (Judges 13:22; Isa. 6:5)... God’s invisibility is his holiness.”

230 “The incompatibility of God and sin is thought of almost in the sense of an automatism; that everything in a state contrary to the holiness of God, in His vicinity, is eradicated. On this background also is to be seen that every contact with the holy is regarded as a danger, because mistakes and offense must lead to immediate annihilation. Because in the biblical conception seeing always entails a direct experience, seeing in this particular context of the (immediate) vicinity of the holy becomes also problematised.” Christoph Dohmen, “»Nicht sieht mich der Mensch und lebt« (Ex 33, 20): Aspekte der Gottesschat im Alten Testament” Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie 13 (1998): 36 [art. 31-31]. See also Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism,” 34: “There is...from early times, the tradition not so much that the deity is invisible as that it is deadly for man to see him... This line of thought...does not assert that the deity is invisible, but depends on the holiness and awfulness of his aspect which must bring death to men who see him.” See also below.

231 As noticed by Terrien, Evasive Presence, 144, 146; On the pānim as Yahweh’s cultic, theophanic presence see Beyerin, Origins and History, 104-106.


233 That the הלהי כָּבֹד in this pericope is “exceedingly” or “intensely” anthropomorphic has been pointed by a number of commentators. See Kuntz, Self-Revelation, 39; Morgenstem, “Biblical Theophanies,” 1:178; Carolyn J. Sharp, “Dancing Across the Seams: The Interplay of Public and Private Theophany,” Church Divinity (1991-1992): 16-18 [art. 12-21], Rachel M. Billings, “The Problem of the Divine Presence: Source-Critical Suggestions for the Analysis of Exodus XXXIII 12-23,” VT 54 (2004): 427-444, suggests that vv. 19-20 are secondary “exegetical commentary” on the strongly anthropomorphic theophany of vv. 18, 21-23, the purpose of which is to “deanthropomorphize” the theophany. Her source-critical division has little to commend it however, and she failed to grasp the relation between the kāḇōd and pānim in this pericope.
divine can be understood in relation to the danger elsewhere associated with the קובר. Thus, Lev. 10:1-3 describes the incineration of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu who approached Yahweh with ‘strange fire.’ In reaction, divine fire flared from the קובר of Yahweh and consumed the boys (קובר א擬). In v. 3 Moses describes this lethal reaction from the קובר as Yahweh ‘showing himself holy’ (קובר א擬) and being ‘glorified’ (מטל) before the people. Here, as in other instances (e.g. Ezek 28:22; cf. Exod. 14:4; Lev. 22:32; Num. 20:12-13), the verbs are synonymous and denote a form of divine punishment. As J.H. Eaton notes: “God... ‘asserts his holiness’ when he blazes out with fire against imposters in the sanctuary”. This is likely the background to the description of רוח מבית קובר as a “consuming fire” (רוח בבית קובר) Deut. 4:24; Exod. 24:17).  

This is also the background against which we must understand the pericope in Exod. 33:18-23. Moses, by asking to see קובר in v. 18 is not requesting a new experience of the divine. He and the Israelites had indeed “witnessed God’s glory often (e.g. Exod 16:10; 24:9-11, 16-17; 33:7-11).”  

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234 For Lev. 10 as an expression of the biblical “conviction that visual contact with the divine is lethal” see Savran, Encountering the Divine, 19.


237 Niehaus, God at Sinai, 209.


239 Daniel W. Ulrich, “Exodus 33:12-23,” Int (October 2002): 411. See also Michael Widmer, Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer. A Study of Exodus 32-34 and Numbers 13-14 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe 8; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 143: “According to the book of Exodus, YHWH's קובר has already been revealed on a number of occasions, most importantly in the theophany at Mount Sinai before the breach of covenant. On that occasion YHWH’s קובר was publicly visible in the form of a devouring fire (24:17 קובר א擬). Moreover, Moses has already experienced YHWH’s קובר in the liberation from Egypt (cf. 9:16, 14:4, 18), and in the miraculous providence in the desert, where God escorted His people in a pillar of cloud and fire through the wilderness (16:7, 10). Thus it appears that Moses asks for a divine manifestation that he and the people have already seen and experienced before.”

240Widmer, Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer, 143 argues that “Exod 33:1-11 not only prepares the stage for Moses’ dialogue with Yahweh (33:12-23), but also provides essential information for the logic of the ensuing narrative.” And Houtman, Exodus, 5686 notes that “The intermezzo is not arbitrary. The section 33:4-11 serves to lay the groundwork for a fruitful continuance of the dialogue... in the current
recalling that it had previously been Moses’ habit\textsuperscript{241} to speak to Yahweh in the “tent of meeting” “face-to-face” (פָּנֵי אֲדֹנָי) as one man speaks to his friend. While פָּנֵי אֲדֹנָי is idiomatic and suggests “intimate” dialoguing,\textsuperscript{242} we cannot agree with Walther Eichrodt that the expression “is nothing more than a heightened metaphor for a personal meeting and speaking with the invisible God.”\textsuperscript{243} The redactor, by introducing the pericope found in 33:18-23 by that found in 33:7-11,\textsuperscript{244} clearly intends to contrast the two situations. The idiom “face-to-face” here suggests that “In these passages Yahweh removed the concealing cloud” and that “only Moses was allowed to look on Yahweh without his ‘veil’.”\textsuperscript{245} That Moses’ distinction as being the one to whom Yahweh spoke ‘face-to-face’ involves a visual component is confirmed by Num. 12:8: “With him (i.e. Moses) I speak mouth to mouth (פָּנֵי אֲדֹנָי), clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the (very) form of Yahweh (יְהוָה).” Speaking with Moses ‘mouth-to-mouth’, a cognate of ‘face-to-face’, is here qualified by Moses’ distinct privilege of beholding Yahweh’s 明顯 in Ps. 17:15, the divine 明顯 and 子 are synonymously parallel and are the object of the psalmist’s visual desire. Also, the LXX renders Num. 12:8: καὶ θεὸς ὁ ἐρωτόμοις ἔδειξεν.

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\textsuperscript{241} The verbs throughout vv. 7-11 are in the imperfect and have a frequentative force. Most commentators therefore interpret this unit (vv.7-11) as a reference to the habitual practice of Moses throughout the wilderness wanderings of setting up the Tent at every encampment. See e.g. Maran, Divine Presence, 144; Noth, Exodus, 255. Moberly’s (As the Mountain, 64, 171-2) alternative reading of these imperfect verbs, viz. that (1) they are intended to convey the sense of an impermanent tent in lieu of Yahweh’s now withdrawn presence, and (2) they are a literary device to slow the narrative at a transitional point, is less than convincing. Cf. also Houman, Exodus, 3:693 who reads this unit as a description of Moses’ reaction to the Calf incident, with 33:7 relating a one-time incident, while 7b-11 describe events that frequently took place thereafter.


\textsuperscript{243} Theology, 2:37

\textsuperscript{244} On the redactor’s purposeful integration of the tradition represented by vv. 7-11 into the larger narrative of chapter 33 see Chiéot, Book of Exodus, 589-93.

\textsuperscript{245} TDOT 11.256 s.v. עַנָּן by Freedman and Willoughby.
The MT's נלחם is translated דוֹם, the LXX's normal translation for בָּהֳלָה. The use here of the aorist (adverting to some past occasion) suggests that the LXX translator understood the verse to reference a past viewing of Yahweh's קָּבֹד by Moses; the reference may very well be to the experiences alluded to in Exod 33:11. Thus, Moses' face-to-face encounter with Yahweh likely involved his beholding the deity's luminous קָבֹד/פָּנִים.

Though Moses and the Israelites used to be able to see the קָבֹד יְהוֹ ה, the Golden Calf incident (chapter 32) that begins this larger narrative unit (chapters 32-34) has rendered them impure; Yahweh's presence, בַּלָּא, can no longer abide in their midst lest it consume (יִצְבַּע) them (Exod. 33:3). This is the main point of the chapter. As Moberly wrote, "The problem in the present context...is how a holy God can abide with a sinful people." And as Barr pointed out, this is the issue undergirding the discussion over seeing Yahweh in 33:18-23.

In this chapter the problem is not really the problem of anthropomorphism as such...It seems clear that the passage was written for its context, that is, to follow immediately after the incident of the sin of Israel in making the golden calf. The problem is therefore: how can Yahweh now go with Israel on their journey? The danger is that if he goes with them personally, he will consume them clearly, because of their rebelliousness...the problem which interests the writer is not that of anthropomorphism and transcendence but that of sin and atonement in relation to (a) the accompanying presence and (b) the vision or appearance of Yahweh.

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247 So Weiss, "Toward a Literary ," 114 n. 22; Van Seters, Life of Moses, 238, 349.

248 Dohmen "Nicht siehte," 40 notes that 'face-to-face' and 'seeing the form' (Num. 12:8) represent "verwendeten hebräischen Gedanken".

249 Van Seters, Life of Moses, 332 notes: "It is the divine presence in the form of fire that is associated with the verb 'to consume' (לָבָשׂ). See also Dohmen, "Nicht siehten," 33-4.

250 At the Mountain, 67.

251 "Theophany and Anthropomorphism," 35-6. See also Hauge, Descent from the Mountain, 117: "While ideas of human sin as well as divine grace must be relevant, the categories of encounter and theophany as well as the elite character of the vision experience suggest that the story probes far bolder and deeper into the very nature of the religious experience."
As the famous second century Rabbi Simeon b. Jonai is given to say: "Before the golden calf incident Israel could look at the devouring appearance of God and not be alarmed. After the incident, however, they dare not even approach Moses with the glory of his face (cf. Exod. 34:29-35)."²³² But how does one explain that "even Moses, the mediator who did not participate in the sin of the people, and was assured of YHWH's ongoing נִשְׁפָּת (33:14), is (also) in danger of His consuming holy נִשְׁפָּת and therefore is in need of special assistance (33:20, 23)?"²³³ Moses is here a synecdoche for the house of Israel.²³⁴ And as the status of the prophet mirrors the status of the covenant,²³⁵ Moses' experience on Mount Sinai reflects the new status of Israel and the covenant. His new inability to bare Yahweh's Glory is reflective of Israel's new condition.²³⁶ Moses' insistent inclusion of Israel in his dialogue with and petitions to Yahweh²³⁷ indeed amounted to a 'costly solidarity,' as Michael Widner termed it.²³⁸

But Moses, and therefore Israel, does get a vision of Yahweh, albeit not what he/his had hoped for. What does Moses see? Yahweh places Moses in the cleft of a rock to shield

²³³ Widner, Moses, God, and the Dynamics, 165.
²³⁶ Thus Ulrich, "Exodus 33:12-23," 412: "Moses has chosen to stand in solidarity with the rest of Israel, and like the rest of Israel he will need divine protection in order to survive in God's presence." Face Sharp, "Dancing Across the Seams," 18: "It can be clearly seen that the glory material focuses entirely on the apprehension of divine presence by Moses as an individual. Neither continuity with patriarchal theophanies nor subsequent instruction of Israel by Moses on the basis of his experience is suggested in the text." This may be true of the pre-canonical, independent tradition, but in its current context it is clearly connected to Moses' role as covenant mediator and his insistent solidarity with Israel.
²³⁸ Widner, Moses, God, and the Dynamics, 123. Van Seters, Life of Moses, 334 fails to discern in this dialogue a discrepancy between Yahweh's willingness to accommodate Moses only, and the latter's insistence that Israel be included as well. He argues, "Whatever the deity does for Moses as leader, he does for the people as a whole". This is contradicted, however, by Exod. 32:9-19: "Yahweh said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you (Moses) I will make a great nation.'"
him from the overbearing radiance of the *kāḇōḏ/pānîm* as it passes by him.259 As an extra precaution, he also shields Moses with his hand (*ḥâvîh*), or maybe his skirt (*kînîm*).260 When Yahweh’s *kāḇōḏ/pānîm* passes and Yahweh lowers his hand/skirt, Moses is able to see Yahweh’s *rûḥânî*, hinder-parts. What is the divine *rûḥânî*? Its juxtaposition here to the *pōtsîm/bîbûr*, Yahweh’s dangerously luminous body, rules out all attempts to read *rûḥânî* temporally (as a reference to the future deeds of Yahweh),261 or abstractly (as a reference to some of Yahweh’s more benign attributes).262 R.W.L. Moberly’s interpretation, “afterglow” is suggestive.263 The divine *rûḥânî*, whatever its relation to the *ḥôdôn* (‘goodness’) and *šôn* (‘name’) of Exod 33:19,264 is possibly a less radiant, though not necessarily ‘non-radiant’265 appearance, one more accommodating to human frailty. As the gods of

259 Cf. Isa. 2:20-21: “On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the crags, from the terror (יָרֵא) of Yahweh, and from the glory of his majesty (גֹּדֵל/רֹאשׁ), when he rises to terrify the earth.” See also the Mesopotamian account of the deities “fluttering like bees” to “fly off to the clefts of rocks” from before the radiant countenance of Jananna *ANET*, 579-8.


Homer could ‘turn it down’ for the purposes of initiating human contact, so too could (apparently) Israel’s deity.266

Exod 33:18-23 is therefore not a categorical denial of divine visibility. The important issues touched upon in this pericope are divine holiness and human sin, and how the encounter between the two imperils man. George Savran has argued that “Seeing Yahweh is the ultimate experience in biblical theophany.”267 Because of the (spatial) intimacy involved in such an experience, and therefore the potential encountering of holiness with impurity, seeing Yahweh is also the most perilous experience in biblical theophany.268 “Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings? (Isa. 33:14)” This pericope does not imply that Yahweh is invisible, but that he is dangerously holy, and mortal (i.e. impure) eyes gaze at their own risk.269

2.4. Anthropomorphic Theophany and the Prophetic Call

Eliezer Berkovits suggested that “The encounter with God is condicio sine qua non of all prophecy,”270 and according to Y. Kaufmann “Prophecy is entirely rooted in popular conceptions of theophany.”271 If Klaus Baltzer is correct and the prophetic call narratives are the most likely source to find information about “the essence and function of the

266 See further below.

267 Savran, Encountering the Divine, 52.


269 TDMT 5:332 s.v. ἀνάξιος by to Michaelis: “The basic principle of Ex. 33:20b, namely, that he who sees God must die, is not thinking of death as a fixed penalty for violation of a corresponding prohibition, for no such prohibition is stated either here or elsewhere. Rather the holiness and majesty of God on the one side, and the unworthiness of man on the other, mean that man cannot see God without being completely destroyed”; Wolfson, Trough a Spectum, 27: “The seeing of God’s face (Ex. 33) is objectionable not because it is theologically impossible but rather because of the ensuing danger that it necessarily entails.”

270 Berkovits, God, Man and History, 27.

prophetic office,”272 these observations stand confirmed, because theophany and visio Dei constitute a defining aspect of the biblical prophetic call narrative.273 Savran aptly describes the call-narratives as “a particular subset of initial theophany narratives.”274 Already H. Ewald, who saw in the call-event “eine wirkliche, geheimnisvolle Gottesbegegnung,” argued that there was no genuine prophets of Yahweh “der nicht zuvor seinen Blick in die volle Herrlichkeit und Heiligkeit Jahve’s selbst geworfen (hätte)”.275 There is of course no way of knowing exactly what the prophets of ancient Israel actually experienced on the occasion of their ‘call,’ or even what they thought they had experienced; the narratives in the biblical text treating these events are apologetic, not autobiographical, and therefore employ rather conventional literary methods.276 They are also likely the work of later tradents concerned with vindicating the prophet.277

The Berufungsbericht therefore tells us more about the socio-religious community’s

272 Klaus Baltzer, “Considerations Regarding the Office and Calling of the Prophet,” HTR 6 (1968): 568.

273 J.O. Akao, “Biblical Call Narratives: An Investigation onto the Underlying Structures,” Oghonosa journal of Theology 8D (1993):3 [art.=1-11]: “In their call experiences, the emphasis of having been to (sic) the immediate presence of the deity becomes necessary in order to authenticate the message delivered. Thus most of the prophets with call narrative are found describing how in one form or another they have interacted with the deity in the process of their commissioning (Is 6:1; Jer 1:5; Ez 2:1 of Gen. 24:34 and 24:11); Johannes Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1962) 192: “It is reminiscent of being called is often based on a particular experience in the life of the prophet, combined with a theophany in the form of an ecstatic vision or audition.” Regarding ‘vision or audition’ see Savran, Encountering the Divine, 52: “visual contact with the divine is not simply important, but represents a fundamental form of validation of the theophanic experience. In many theophany narratives an initial visual encounter is essential to the experience of the divine, and seems to be an integral part of the process of initiation into further (usually verbal) contact with the divine.”

274 Encountering the Divine, 13; idem, “Theophany as Type Scene,” 126.

275 Die Propheten des Alten Bundes I (Stuttgart, 1840) 20.


expectations regarding such an event than it does about the prophet's personal experience itself.278

Scholars, observing the basic structural similarities between such call accounts as
Exod. 3:1-4, Judg. 6, Jer. 1, Isa 6, and Ezek. 1, have attempted to discern and define a
Gattung (basic literary form) behind the various call-narratives, a literary paradigm defined
by a number of mandatory components that appear in a fixed or nearly fixed order.279
The assumption is that the traditions appealed to this socially accepted (and expected)
Gattung when composing the apologetic Berufungsbericht for the prophet(s).280 On the other


280 Habel, "Form and Significance," 317: "the prophetic call accounts...seem to be the product of later reflection as the prophets concerned announce their credentials to Israel at large, either orally or in writing, in accordance with the tradition of their predecessors. By employing this form the prophets publicly identify themselves as God's ambassadors. The call narratives, therefore, are not primarily pieces of autobiographical information but open proclamations of the prophet's claim to be Yahweh's agent at work in Israel...The employment of the literary form in no way negates the reality of the call encounter itself, but underscores the relevance of this form for the public affirmation of the claims which the prophet is making as Yahweh's spokesman." See also von Rohr, *Old Testament Theology*, II:56.
hand, Savran prefers to speak of a "type-scene" instead of a *Gattung*; while the latter is characterized by a rigid form to which all examples are expected to, or even (by later form-critics) made to, conform, the former is characterized by a number of recurrent motifs, each to be variously applied or not according to the literary objective of the narrative in which they are embedded.\footnote{Encountering the Divine, Chapter 1; idem, "Theophany as Type-Scene." See already N.F. Schmidt and P.J. Nel, "Theophany as type-scene in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal for Semiotics* 11 (2002): 256-281.}

Such an abandonment of the form-critical method was already anticipated by Wolfgang Richter, who was able to show that, instead of a *Gattung*, the *Berufungserichte* exhibit a certain 'schema,' with a number of *Schemata* which, when taken up in various genre, shaped these materials rather than defined them.\footnote{Die sogenannten vorprophetischen Berufungserichte, 136-81.}

We will not enter this form-critical debate here, except to say that we are convinced by the latter arguments.

While there is currently no consensus regarding the nature or contours of a prophetic call *Gattung*, or the exact components or schemata of a type-scene/schema, a number of key elements have been isolated. These include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) a divine encounter (Exod. 3:1-4; Judg. 6:11-12; Isa. 6:1-2; Jer. 1:4; Ez. 1:1-28; I Sam. 3:10; Isa. 40:1-11); a commission (Exod. 3:10; Judg. 6:11-12; Isa. 6:8-10; Jer. 1:5; Ezek. 2:5, 8); an objection from the *vocans* (one called) to the commission or an obstacle to be overcome before the commission can proceed (Exod. 3:11; Judg. 6:15; Isa. 6:11; Jer. 6; Ezek. 2:6, 8 [or 4:1-4\footnote{Hafemann, *Paul, Moses and the History of Israel*, 50 argues that the 'center of gravity in the prophetic call narratives is the objection/obstacle motif'. For a cross-culturally look at prophetic call narratives and the element of objection/resistance see Buss, "An Anthropological Perspective," 13-14.}]); and a sign of assurance (Exod. 3:12; Judg. 6:17; Jer. 1:9-10; Ezek. 2:8-3:11).\footnote{See D. Nathan Phinney, "The Prophetic Objection in Ezekiel IV 14 and its Relation to Ezekiel’s Call,” *VT* 55 (2005): 75-87.}

Of the several recurrent motifs that might constitute a prophetic call type-scene, one will concern us here, as it is especially important in understanding the

\footnote{These schemata are taken from the influential call-*Gattung* proposed by Habel, "Form and Significance". For similar models see Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel*, 49; Hubbard, "Commissioning Stories," 104-06; idem, *Methoden Redaktion, 25-52; Vieweger, Spezifik, 56-64; Richter, *Die sogenannten vorprophetischen Berufungserichte*, 136-69; Waschke, "Berufung II," 1248; Kutsch, "Gideons Berufung," 79.}
Qur'anic allusions to Muhammad's prophetic call: the initial divine encounter. Later we shall have occasion to examine a second relevant motif, namely the prophetic sign ('ot).

2.4.1. The Divine Encounter

In his commentary on Ezekiel, Walther Zimmerli delineated two different types of call narratives. One, represented by the calls of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10), Moses (Exod. 3:1-4:17), Gideon (Judg. 6:11-24), and Saul (I Sam. 9:15-27), was characterized by a very personal encounter between the vocandus and the divine, either Yahweh or his (angelic) messenger. A dialogue transpires, during which the vocandus displays some reluctance or even offers objections, which Yahweh overcomes through the granting of signs. In this "Jeremian type of call account," the word of Yahweh dominates.

In the second type, represented by I Kings 22:19-21 and Isa. 6:1-8, the vocandus encounters Yahweh in a vision enthroned among his heavenly host, the Israelite version of the ANE divine council. The distance between Yahweh and the vocandus is emphasized, and the latter has no room to object; no dialogue takes place. In this second type of call narrative, the vision of Yahweh dominates. Ezekiel's call, argues Zimmerli, is a mix of the two call-types.

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286 Ezekiel 1, 97-100.

287 The anointing of Saul as king of Israel is, however, not a prophetic call, as is recognized by commentators.

288 Zimmerli Ezekiel 1, 99 admits that 1 Kings 22:19-21 "contains no call narrative in the strict sense," but its "strong connections" with Isa. 6:1-8 "justify us speaking of a type of commission narrative, which underlies Isaiah 6." See also von Rad, Old Testament Theology II:56.

Not everyone accepts Zimmerli’s basic premise of two call-type. Both Norman Habel and Burke O. Long saw only “one essential type” behind the various call accounts. We accept Zimmerli’s basic premise; his characterization of the two types, however, stand in need of revision. It is clear that the accounts of Moses and Gideon on the one hand, and Isaiah and Ezekiel on the other, are fundamentally different experiences. While the former have personal, one-on-one encounters with mal'āk Yhwh, whom they both initially misidentify, the latter encounter Yahweh in his glory, enthroned and often surrounded by his court. The former are initially indifferent to the divine presence before them, the latter are overwhelmed. The former dialogue with the divine “as one man speaks to his friend,” the latter have few words to say before the holiness confronting them. These are indeed different experiences narrated. A number of scholars distinguish between the call of a savior/hero (Moses/Gideon) and the call of a prophet (Jeremiah/Isaiah/Ezekiel). This seems reasonable. But how do we understand the differences in divine manifestations?

2.4.1.1. The Kābōd (Glory) Theophany

Zimmerli, by characterizing the distinction between the two call types as auditory versus visionary, has obscured their character and relation rather than clarified them. The distinction implies that theophany and visio Dei are key elements in only the second type. As a particular sub-set of the theophany narrative, we would expect theophany

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290 For a review of Zimmerli’s thesis and reactions to it see Killian, “Prophetischen Berufungsberichte.”

291 Habel, “Form and Significance”; Burke O. Long, “Prophetic Call Traditions and Reports of Visions,” ZAW 84 (1972): 494-500. See also Hafemann, Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel, 48; Reventlow, Liturgie, 22-77. On the other hand, Voges “Les récits de vocation,” delineates four commission types.

292 On this initial error as recurrent motif in call-narratives see Simon, Reading, 54, who describes this initial error as the messengers’ mistake in initially identifying the one calling him, such as Gideon addressing the mal’āk Yhwh as “my lord” instead of “My Lord” (Judg. 6:13), or Moses thinking he was turning aside only to see a flaming bush that failed to burn (Exod. 3:3), or Samuel thrice failing to identify the source of the voicing calling him (1 Sam. 3:4-8).


295 Savran, Encountering the Divine, 13; idem, “Theophany as Type Scene,” 126.
to be a key element in call-narratives generally. Indeed it is according to several form-
critics. But for a number of these scholars the term ‘theophany’ is used too broadly:
subsumed under this rubric are not just appearances of Yahweh, but of his “heavenly
messenger” as well. We would argue that this broad use of ‘theophany’ is counter-
productive, and that theophany stricto sensu is a sine qua non of a prophetic call-narrative.
The difference between Zimmerli’s two call-types is not audition versus vision, or
theophany versus non-theophany (though he did not explicitly present the distinction as
such); one of the key differences is in the manner of theophany or, better, the
Erscheinungsformen. In one (type 2) we encounter what could be called a ‘Glory’ theophany,
where Yahweh appears to the future prophet in his transcendentally anthropomorphic
form (Isa 6; Ezek. 1). This is also referred to as Yahweh’s ‘throne theophany’ as the
deity is seen sitting enthroned in royal splendor and in the company of his divine court.
The Israelite prophet is the messenger of the divine court; he announces to Israel the
decrees of the Council, over which Yahweh sits as Judge and King. Indeed, “The intrinsic
authority of the prophet’s message derives from the fact that he participated in the divine
council (Amos 3:7; Jer. 23:18).” During this encounter, the prophet-to-be is

On theophany as a key element in the call narrative see Savran, Encountering the Divine, 16-18, Glazov, 
Bridging of the Tongue, 51; Hafemann, Paul, Moser, and the History of Israel, 49; Akao, “Biblical Call Narratives”;
ibidem, “Burning Bush,” 150f; Del Olmo Lete, La vocación, 377-86; Long, “Prophetic Call Traditions”;
Baltzer, “Considerations” 568; Kilian, “Prophetischen Berufungsberichte,” 370-71; Habel, “Form and
Significance,” 316-17; Reventlow, Liturgie, 70f. See also von Rad, Old Testament Theology II:57-9. Pac
Richter, Die sogenannten vorseprophetischen Berufungsberichte, 141-42. See also Norman Habel, Review of Richter,

Assuming, with the majority opinion, that Isaiah 6 represents the prophet’s call-account.

On the ‘throne-theophany’ see Matthew Black, “The Throne-Theophany Prophetic Commission and the
Culture in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honor of William David Davies (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 57-71; Blake Thomas
Osdar, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” BYU
5-43; N.L.A. Tidwell, “WA’OMAR (Zech 3:5) and the Genre of Zechariah’s Fourth Vision,” JBL 94 (1975):
343-55; Datel Merkur, “Prophetic Initiation in Israel and Judah,” in L. Bryce Boyer and Simon A.
Grolnick (edd.), The Psychoanalytic Study of Society, Volume 12, Essays in honor of George Devereux (Hillsdale, NJ:

prophecy and the divine council see further: Martti Nissinen, “Prophets and the Divine Council,” in Ulrich
unexpectedly confronted by Yahweh's transcendent form in its holiness and brilliance and suffers, or fears suffering, as a result. Isaiah, after unexpectedly seeing Yahweh as a transcendent anthropos enthroned within the Temple, cries in fear:

Woe is me! For I am undone. For I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell among an unclean people; Yet my eyes have seen the king, Yahweh of Hosts (6.5)


On this reading of midrash see Savran, Divine Encounters, 104-06. See further the discussion in Glazov, Bridling of the Tongue, 130-42.
Isaiah, realizing that his mortal impurity (indicated by his unclean lips) is here confronted by the thrice-great holiness of Yahweh (as indicated by the seraphic chant of the Trisagion, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is Yahweh of Host’ v. 3), is struck with dread because of the inherent and well-known danger of such an encounter. But before he could suffer the effects of his trespass becoming, in Kuntz’s words, a “victim of the theophanic encounter,” Isaiah is purified by one of Yahweh’s angelic attendants (vv. 6-7) and made ready to stand before the holy deity and participate in the deliberations of the council. Ezekiel too sees Yahweh as an enthroned, transcendent anthropos (Ezek. 1:1-28), though not within the context of a divine council scene. Indeed, Ezekiel’s vision of the deity is at once the most transcendent and the most anthropomorphic of the entire Bible. During his call Ezekiel comes closer than Isaiah to becoming a ‘victim’ of the

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305 According to Safran, Divine Encounters, 19 Is 6.5 “describes not simply Isaiah’s shocked silence after his vision of the heavenly throne, but his actual conviction that he is going to die as a result of the experience.” See also Glazov, Binding of the Tongue, 130-36; Paul R. House, “Isaiah’s Call and its Context in Isaiah 1-6,” Criswell Theological Review 62 (1993): 219 [art =207-22]; Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips,” 83.

306 Kuntz, Self-Revelation, 18.

307 Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips,” 62 notes: “The complete purity signified by the purity of the lips is the purity which enables a man to stand with the gods.”

308 Von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 1:146: “The light-phenomenon of the ‘glory of God’ (in Ezekiel 1) clearly displays human contours... nevertheless at the same time an infinite difference and distance is tacitly recognized first in the matter of mere stature, for Israel conceived Yahweh as gigantic (Mic. 1.3ff; Is. LXIII. 1ff; Ps. XXIV. 9), but also different and distant as regards quality, for the (qāḥād) which man has cannot, of course, be remotely compared with the fiery, intensely radiant light which is the nature of Yahweh.” See also above n. 176.

309 Thus Hans Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12. A Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 253-4: “The four living creatures which... encircle the throne of God, are in reality nothing more than accoutrements... there is no glimpse into the heavenly meeting of the full council. Therefore, Ezekiel does not really depict an actual 76 (divine council).”

310 Compare Kasher, “Anthropomorphism, Holiness and Cult,” 192: “there is perhaps no other biblical prophet whose God is so corporeal as Ezekiel. Anthropomorphism did not, of course, originate with Ezekiel; the Bible offers many anthropomorphic descriptions of the Deity... The prophet Ezekiel belongs to this general biblical tradition and in fact amplifies it” and Daniel I. Block, The Book of Ezekiel (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 106-8: “With respect to force and awesomeness, no theophany in the entire OT matches Ezekiel’s inaugural vision... First, the vision proclaims the transcendent glory of God. Everything about the apparition proclaims his glory: the dazzling
theophanic encounter: after a detailed description of the approaching chariot-throne, Ezekiel’s attention shifts to the brilliantly radiant anthropos seated thereupon. After an ‘emotional’ description loaded with qualifiers, indicating that the prophet was searching for the right words to describe the undescrivable, Ezekiel falls to the ground in a faint. It required a divine act (a spirit from Yahweh coming upon him 2:1-2) to enable the prophet to stand on his feet and receive the commission. Ezekiel’s physical breakdown in the face of the divine, and Isaiah’s purification in order to stand before the divine safely, suggests that these experiences are not visionary, but real.

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brilliance of the entire image, the gleam of the creatures’ bronze legs, the jewels on the wheels, the crystalline platform, the lapis lazuli throne, the amorphous and fiery form of the ‘man.’ Everything about the vision cries ‘Glory’ (cf. Ps 29:9), even the prophet’s frustrating search for adequate forms of expression...Everything about the vision is in the superlative mode. God is alone above the platform, removed from all creatures, and stunning in his radiance.”

311 On Ezek. 1 as an example of a gradual revelation of the divine by means of visual depictions which increase in intensity in anticipation of the ultimate stage of visual revelation” see Savran, Divine Encounters, 34-60.


313 Savran, Divine Encounters, 19, 116: “In the case of Ezekiel one sees the initiate’s fascination in the elaborately detailed description of the chariot. Yet when he actually sees the figure on the heavenly chariot he faints, not out of rapture, but out of fright in the face of thenuminos...While elsewhere the phrase (“I fell on my face” v. 28) has connotations of prayer, or dismay, here it indicates physical breakdown.” See also ibid., 116-19; Block, “Text and Emotion,” 430-1, 434.

314 Ibid.

2.4.1.2. The Angelomorphic Theophany or God incogniti

The above experiences are altogether different from those of Moses and Gideon (Zimmerli's call-type I). In these latter encounters, there is no kâbîd Yahweh; it is not even clear at first sight that there is Yahweh. The encounter in these call-narratives is with the mal’âk Ywhhw (Exod. 3:2a; Jdg 6:11ff), most commonly translated as ‘the Angel of the Lord.’ But this translation, as is widely recognized, is inadequate. The Hebrew mal’âk is not the same phenomenon as the figures of later Jewish and Christian angelology; no wings or halo, so familiar to us from Renaissance art, are implied.

Indeed, “Divine messengers are usually depicted as indistinguishable from human beings.” As James Kugel points out: “angels...look like men, they talk like men, they can sit down and walk around and maybe even eat like men.” This is true of the mal’âk Yhwhh as well: “the Angel of the Lord appeared in human form...and performed human functions.”

The Hebrew term הַנִּלָּה is thought to be the nominal construct form of the verb הֵנה, unattested in Hebrew, but found in Ugaritic, Arabic, Ethiopic and Phoenician with the

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316 As S.A. Meier notes (DDD 47 s.v. Angel I הַנִּלָּה): “The translation of mal’âk by ‘angel’ in English Bibles obscures the ancient Israelite perception of the divine realm.” See also Bamford, “Seeing God,” 83.


319 DDD s.v. Angel I הַנִּלָּה by S.A. Meier, 48. He continues, “…while it is in the later books of the OT that they are depicted in overwhelmingly supernatural terms.”


meaning "to send" thus the common translation "messenger." This translation too can be misleading. Jesus-Louis Cunchillos has demonstrated that activity, the carrying out of a mission, in addition to and sometimes instead of orality, the delivering of a message, is important to the Biblical Hebrew מָלָאכָה and theMAL'AKIM in particular. The term therefore denotes function, not ontology, as it is applied to humans, angels and God (Gen. 31:10-13; 48:15-16). Indeed, like MAL'AKIM, MAL'AKIM seems to blur ontological distinctions.

MAL'AKIM, both human and supernatural, are widely attested in the Bible. But the MAL'AKIM is an exceptional figure in that, in the narratives in which he appears, he is indistinguishable from Yahweh himself. As Carol A. Newsom remarks:

322 Samuel A. Meier, The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World (HSM 45; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 11; TDOT 1:76-80 s.v. מָלָאכָה; D. 962 m in the OT) by G. von Rad.


324 See below.

325 See Dmitri Sliniaia, "Our God(s) is One: Biblical שֶׁה-יָה-וּ-אֵ֫-ל and the Indeterminacy of Meaning," SJOT 19 (2005): 13, 14 [art.5-23] who observes regarding the Jabbok story (Gen. 32:25-33): "the designation שֶׁלֶּחָה ("human") and הַנַּשְׁתָּה (man) in the Jabbok story contain a whole 'Jacob's ladder' of meaning pertaining to the identity of Jacob's adversary: from human via angels or other minor divine beings...to God. Our text not only obscures the difference between different kinds of SHEL (angels, God of Israel), but, taken together with (Gen.) 33,10, to a certain extent even erases the boundary between divine and human beings...The use of the word SHEL in 32, 29; 32, 31 and 33,10 is thus related to the blurring of oppositions between the God of Israel and other divine beings, as well as between divine beings and humans...." See also Kugel, God of Old, 36, 23-24: "there is, I think, an important difference between the way that most people nowadays...are accustomed to conceive the spiritual and the way this same thing was conceived in ancient Israel...There are not two realms in the Bible, this world and the other, the spiritual and the material-or rather, these two realms are not neatly segregated but intersect constantly. God turns up around the street corner, dressed like an ordinary person...angels...look like men, they talk like men, they can sit down and walk around and maybe even eat like men. Then, all of a sudden, the whole thing turns out to have been an illusion: their true identity is revealed, and people realize who they are and bow down in reverence...the world in which angels can suddenly appear or disappear is a world in which the border between the spiritual and the physical is not at all clear, or at least not all that respected." The suggestion of Mark Smith, "Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion," CBQ 64 (2002): 631-51 that this 'slippage of divine identity' results from later Israel's 'cultural amnesia' concerning earlier notions of divinity is therefore to be rejected.

326 For a summary of scholarship on this figure see Meier, "Angel of Yahweh"; Gieschen, Angelomorphic Christology, Chap. Three; H. Röttger, Mal'ak Yahweh - Bote von Gott (Regensburger Studien zur Theologie 13; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978) I-xxii. 12-32.
Many of these narratives about the mal'āk yhwh pose a long-standing problem of interpretation: what is the relationship between the messenger/angel of Yahweh and Yahweh? In many of the narratives the mal’āk initially appears to be a distinct figure. But at some point in the account it appears as though Yahweh were personally present instead of the mal’āk yhwh.  

In the story of Hagar’s escape to the wilderness (Gen. 16:7-14), for example, we are told that the mal’āk yhwh found Hagar by a spring of water. Using the divine “I” the mal’āk speaks to Hagar as if he were the deity: “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude (v. 10 NOAB).” And even though the mal’āk refers to Yahweh in the third person (“Yahweh has given heed to your affliction” v. 1), the narrator seems to confirm our suspicions that this is actually Yahweh by informing us that it is indeed Yahweh who is speaking to Hagar (v. 13). She then names the deity speaking to her, El-rmi רֹמָי, possibly a double entendre meaning both “God who appears/may be seen” and “God who sees.” Hagar exclaims: “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?”

How does one account for this “casual transit between yhwh and his mal’āk”? A number of theories have been proffered in an attempt to precisely identify the רְמָי and define his relation to yhwh. Three theories seem to enjoy greatest currency: (1) the interpolation theory, according to which the mal’āk was added by a later redactor to a narrative that originally spoke boldly of an anthropomorphic theophany; (2)

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327 ABD 1:250 s.v., Angel by Carol A. Newsom.
328 See Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 56.
332 For a recent review of the various theories of interpretation see Gieschen, Anthropomorphic Christology, 53-57.
333 Endorsed most recently by S. A. Meier, DDD s.v., Angel of Yahweh יתנשא נ現代, 53-59; H. Gunkel, Genesis (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997) 184-87; D. Irvin, Mythron: The Comparison of Tales from the Old
representative theory, according to which the מַלְאָךְ יהוה מֵאָדָם is a representative of Yahweh, an agent distinct from him who only speaks and acts in Yahweh’s name as messengers from the ANE were known to do;\textsuperscript{334} (3) the identity theory, according to which the מַלְאָךְ יהוה מֵאָדָם is a particular corporeal manifestation of Yahweh himself.\textsuperscript{335}

An examination of all of the passages wherein the singular מַלְאָךְ יהוה מֵאָדָם occurs as a designation for a non-human allows us to make the following claims with confidence:\textsuperscript{336} (1) no one theory can accommodate all of the occurrences\textsuperscript{337} and (2) each of the theories adequately explains particular passages. An important point of departure in any attempt to understand the enigmatic ‘Angel of the Lord’ figure is the recognition that distinct phenomena are subsumed under the designation מַלְאָךְ יהוה מֵאָדָם.\textsuperscript{338} Because the Hebrew definite article cannot be employed in the genitive construct when the nomen rection is a proper name, we are never sure (grammatically) when we are dealing with “a messenger/angel of Yahweh,” i.e. an indeterminate agent of the deity of no particular significance, or “the messenger/angel of Yahweh,” i.e. a specific figure.

Contextually, however, it is clear that some occurrences concern an agent distinct from Yahweh who merely represents him (e.g. 2 Sam. 24:15-17); thus, the representative theory. Even the important ‘Angel of the Name’ of Exod. 23:20-21, in whose midst the Name (גֵּד) of Yahweh is placed, while sharing the nature of the deity (by virtue of the name


\textsuperscript{335} Kugel, God of Old, 34; Gieschen, Anthropomorphic Christology, 55, 57; Eichrodt, Theology, 2.37-29; V. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 451: the מַלְאָךְ is “more a representation of God than a representative of God.”

\textsuperscript{336} For a collation of the passages involving the singular mal'ak, collocated ontologically (human, angelic, divine, uncertain) see Juncker, “Jesus and the Angel of the Lord,” 33-34.

\textsuperscript{337} As Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 55 notes: “Few generalizations can be made about all the passages, and each must be discussed on its own terms.”

\textsuperscript{338} Gieschen, Anthropomorphic Christology, 56: “we do not find a uniform Angel of the Lord tradition which leaves the same footprint in each text in which it appears; rather, we find variable traditions”. See also Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 54.
being in him339), is yet clearly distinct from Yahweh. This figure is not the same as the מַלָּךְ הַיָּהֹウェָה of such passages as Gen. 16:7-14; Exod. 3:2-6; Judg. 6:11-23; 13: 1-22.340

The representative theory cannot account for the chief peculiarity of these latter passages: “the figure of the mal’ak YHWH is often perplexingly and inconsistently identified with Yahweh himself.”341 An adequate explanation of this identification resists appeal to the well-known speech patterns of ANE messengers where the oscillation between first and third person was not anomalous.342 As S.A. Meier has pointed out:

It is frequently asserted that messengers, when delivering their messages, often did not distinguish between themselves and the one who sent them. It is true that messengers do speak in the first person as if they were the sender of the message, but it is crucial to note that such speech, in unequivocal messenger contexts, is always preceded by a prefatory comment along the lines of ‘PN [the sender] said to you’ after which the message is provided; thus, a messenger clearly identifies the words of the one who sent the message. A messenger would subvert the communication process were he or she to fail to identify the one who sent the messenger on his or her mission. In texts that are sufficiently well preserved, there is never a question as to who is speaking, whether it be the messenger or the one who sent the messenger.

There is therefore no evidence for the frequently made assertion that messengers need not make any distinction between themselves and the ones who sent them... The only contexts in biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature where no distinction seems to be made between sender and messenger occur in the case of the “angel (literally “messenger”) of Yahweh (mal’ak YHWH).” It is precisely the lack of differentiation that occurs with this figure, and this figure alone among messengers, that raise the question as to whether this is even a messenger of God at all. It must be underscored that the angel of Yahweh in these perplexing biblical narratives does not behave like any other messenger known in the divine or human realm. Although the term ‘messenger’ is present, the narrative itself omits the indispensable features of messenger activity and presents instead the activities which one associates with Yahweh or the other gods of the ancient Near East.343


340 Gieschen, Angelomorphic Christology, 57: “Unlike texts involving the Angel of the Lord in which he is a manifestation of God, the angel that is spoken of here is clearly distinct from God, but not completely separate from him. Because the Name of God is synonymous with his divine nature, the angel or being who has his Name should be regarded as a person possessing his full divine authority and power.”

341 DDD s.v. Angel of Yahweh מַלָּךְ הַיָּהֹウェָה by S.A. Meier, 55.

342 Pace e.g. Arthur S. Herbert, Genesis 12-30: Abraham and his Heirs (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1982) 29: “The Angel and the Lord are apparently identified. This is quite appropriate to ancient thought forms, where the agent in the discharge of his mission is regarded as the extension of the personality of the sender.”

343 DDD s.v. Angel מַלָּךְ הַיָּהֹウェָה by S.A. Meier, 49.
Meier’s last point warrants further consideration. Not only are the actions of the ָיָהָוֹשׁ inconsistent with ancient Near Eastern messenger activity, they are incompatible with it as well.

A representative may indeed speak in the person of his principal, but a representative will never say, for example, ‘I am the king of Babylon.’ Now the mal’ak-Yahweh did say, ‘I am the God of Bethel...I am the God of your father.’ Would anyone ever address a king’s representative, ‘My King!’ Yet Gedeon (sic) said to the mal’ak-Yahweh, ‘Yahweh, Lord.’ The persons to whom the mal’ak appeared, as well as the ancient witnesses to the accounts, regarded the manifestation simply as God Himself.

Dorothy Irvin has compared the mal’ak ywhw texts of Genesis with “[t]he entirety of the narrative material of the Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Ugaritic, and Egyptian literature,” and has concluded that the mal’ak ywhw’s words and actions are analogues, not to those of the messenger figures of these literatures, but to those of the deities themselves:

[When] the messenger of Yahweh or Elohim speaks, he is not understood to be acting as a messenger, even though he is called a messenger. On the basis of comparable narrative material, it can be said that no delivery of a message takes place. It can be concluded that the messenger of Yahweh or Elohim is not thought of in these Genesis stories as being, in fact, a messenger...[I]n the Genesis messenger stories the word ‘messenger’ is used, but the concept of the being, brought out by what he does, is the concept of a god...The word mal’ak as used there is empty of content, other than the concept identical to the role played by the deity in similar extra-biblical stories. Nothing of the belief in the angel as we know it from post-exilic thought, the angel functioning as intermediary, is found in our stories.

Likewise, the interpolation theory makes sense of some passages, but not all. Thus, the ָיָהָוֹשׁ who appeared to Balaam and his donkey in Num. 22 may very well have originally been Yahweh. The excision of ָיָהָוֹשׁ from the text alters the narrative not the slightest. The reason for the mal’ak’s introduction here may have been (mal’ak) Yahweh’s


345 Irvin, *Mystation*, 99, 103. This fact, it seems to me, adequately addresses Meier’s observation: “those who posit an identity...between Yahweh and the mal’ak YHWH apart from this theory (i.e. the interpolation theory) do not do justice to the full significance of the term mal’ak which must mean a subordinate”. *DDD* s.v. Angel 1 ḫk 58. On the contrary, the noted mal’ak ywhw phenomena suggested to Robert North (“Separated Spiritual Substances,” 118) a different meaning of the Hebrew ḫk: “it has seemed to us that the basic sense of mal’ak...is ‘Presence.’ As applied to God himself appearing to men, this presence may be called ‘manifestation’...As implying the ‘production’ of a form or credential under which God makes himself present in a way not normal, the mal’ak is like m ’lāḵ ’kā a form of ‘work’ or operation.” See also idem, “Angel-Prophet or Satan-Prophet?” *JAW* 52 (1970): 33 [art. =31-67].
description in this narrative as a sātān (adversary) in v. 22. In this regard Eichrodt calls attention to Exod. 12:23 where first Yahweh, then, apparently as a gloss, an angel (hammaskit, ‘the destroyer’) is credited with smiting the Egyptian first-born. He also cites 2 Sam 24:1 where Yahweh incited David to take a census of Israel, resulting in Yahweh’s wrath. In the later parallel account in 1 Chron. 21 it is Satan, not Yahweh who so incited the king. Other demonstrated examples could be cited. But Bamford rightly notes: “the interpolation of the word malak before Yahweh is a satisfactory explanation for some but not all of the confusing passages.” The Genesis and Judges passages are cases in point. As James Barr pointed out:

When we come to the malak of the old stories, it seems to me even more doubtful whether we can understand the purpose of its introduction and development as a mitigation of the direct anthropomorphic theophany. Firstly, the introduction of the malak is too extremely spasmodic, and leaves too many fierce anthropomorphisms untouched, for its introduction to be understood in this way. The voice and presence of the malak alternates in a number of stories so much with the voice and appearing of Yahweh that it is hardly possible to understand his place as a substitute for the latter.

2.4.1.2.1 Malak yhwh as Yahweh

In Gen. 31:11-13, the mal ak hâ Elohim appeared to Jacob in a dream and declared, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me (NOAB).” The reference here is clearly to the theophany recorded in Gen. 28:10-17 where Yahweh himself appeared to Jacob at Bethel in a dream and Jacob anointed a pillar and vowed to him. This reference leaves no doubt that Yahweh and the mal ak hâ Elohim are the same. Also explicit is Gen. 48:15-16 where Jacob blessed Joseph and his sons with the words:

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348 See Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 56, 58.
350 Pace Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 58.
351 “Theophony and Anthropomorphism,” 33.
352 Herber, Genesis 12-50, 99.
The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
The God who has led me all my life long to this day,
The mal 'āk who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads (NOAB).

In this passage we see the same oscillation between God and the mal 'āk in three parallel statements about God's protective activity with "the most powerful saving intervention [being] precisely that ascribed to an angel." As D.R. de Lacy observes: "Clearly the passage is picking up previous references to the הַנְפָּלָמָּכְ ל in earlier chapters; but equally clearly the parallelism here removes the possibility of any ambiguity such as may be present in those earlier chapters." Here then we have the evidence that, in the HB "God sometimes chooses to appear and function as an angel." As Eichrodt notes: "If then full value is to be accorded to the evidence of the ancient (Hebrew) narrators, they saw in the mal'ak yhwh in certain cases the operation of God himself".

It is commonly recognized that the mal'ak yhwh is God's anthropomorphic theophany. However, this Erscheinungsform differs from that of the קָבָד-theophany in that here, instead of appearing in his transcendently anthropomorphic form (Isa 6; Ezek. 1) God appears as a "fairly ordinary looking human." He is in fact initially unrecognized by the recipient of the theophany. As the gods of Homer and Hesiod were


357 Eichrodt, Theology, 2:27. See also North, "Separated Spiritual Substances," 118: "As implying the 'production' of a form or credential under which God makes himself present in a way not normal, the mal'ak is like nēlā'ākā a form of 'work' or operation."
358 Encyclopaedia Biblical, 4:5035 s.v. "Theophany"; "the angel of Yahweh is an occasional manifestation of Yahweh in human form"; Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation," 244: "the ancient Israelite belief was that God could appear as an angelic presence to human beings, and the shape this presence took was that of an anthropos. The angelic form...is the garment...in which the divine is clad when it is manifest in the world in the shape of an anthropos." Von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 1: 287: "The angel of Jahweh is Yahweh himself, appearing to human beings in human form."
359 Kugel, God of Old, 34.
wont to don the disguise of a mortal human in order to engage an unsuspecting mortal.\footnote{Wolfsen, “Judaism and Incarnation,” 244.} Yahweh too “appears in the guise of the angel”\footnote{See above.} to fulfill a particular objective.\footnote{Lindblom, “Theophanies in Holy Places in Hebrew Religion,” 102: “The human figure in which God reveals Himself is called a messenger, because his mission is always to deliver a message, an order, a promise.”} What an ‘angel’ really is, these texts are saying, is a way of reporting that God Himself appeared to someone in human form, or more precisely, in what \textit{at first looked like human form}…the angel is essentially an illusion, a piece of the supernatural that poses as ordinary reality for a time. The angel, in other words, is not some lesser order of divine being; it is God himself, but God unrecognized, God intruding into ordinary reality.\footnote{Kugel, \textit{God of Old}, 31, 34.}

The \textit{mal’îk yhwh} is, therefore, \textit{god incogniti}. This ‘anthropomorphic realism,’ as Esther Hamori describes it, accommodates “the capabilities of human senses.”\footnote{Mendenhall, \textit{Tenth Generation}, 61.} As Gieschen notes:

\begin{quote}
The earliest Angel of the Lord traditions…must center on the holiness of God which makes his normal visible form something that brings death to the viewer. Therefore, when God manifests himself in these ancient Angel of the Lord traditions, he visibly appears as an angel so as not to destroy those who see him.\footnote{Gieschen, \textit{Anselmorphic Christology}, 55.}
\end{quote}

We recall that this is precisely the reason the gods of Homer and Hesiod “assume the mask of a mortal character.”\footnote{Clay, “Demas and Aude,” 129.}
2.5. Concluding Remarks

Our study of the prophetic call tradition of the HB⁶⁶⁷ has made two points relevant to our discussion of theophany and visio Dei in Islam. Firstly, the biblical prophetic call involves a theophany.⁶⁶⁸ The vocandus encounters God visually during his commissioning and the report of this encounter authenticates his message to those to whom it is delivered. Angels do not initiate prophetic calls in the HB. The call of Moses narrated in Exodus 3 is no exception: the malāk yhwh who appeared to Moses in the burning bush was God, but God unrecognized.⁶⁶⁹ The ‘Angel of the Lord,’ we have seen above, is God himself in mortal disguise (Judges 6 and 13) and/or simply unrecognized (Exodus 3). Exodus 3 thus narrates an angelomorphic theophany, not an angelophony. The relevance of this to our study will be highlighted in our discussion of Muhammad’s prophetic call. The canonical tradition of Muhammad’s call involves an angelophony. The Qur’anic allusions to this event, however, suggest that it involved a theophany. The Qur’anic insistence on revelatory continuity with the Torah and the Hebrew prophets (see below) leads us to expect Muhammad’s call and commission to involve a theophany.

Also relevant to our study is the biblical tradition of the throne-theophany. In the calls of Isaiah and Ezekiel God appears as an enthroned transcendent anthropos. This transcendent anthropomorphism is characterized by luminosity. This biblical throne-theophany tradition will have an influential nachleben.⁶⁷⁰ The Apostle Paul may have

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⁶⁶⁸ The calls of Jeremiah (Jer. 1) and Samuel (1 Sam. 3) are difficult to place form-critically. However, they both involve theophanies. On Samuel see esp. Gnuse, Dream Theophanies. On Jeremiah see below n. 542.


understood the Christophany that inaugurated his mission in terms consistent with the biblical throne-theophany. The latter will occupy a central place in post-biblical mysticism and esotericism, and through these will impact Islamic tradition and esotericism.

Erich Fascher’s claim to have found the NT’s Deus invisibilis already in the HB is therefore to be rejected. It is not certain, nor even likely, that the Deus aeratus of the Greek NT is the philosophic Deus invisibilis with its ontological invisibility.

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374 Fascher, “Deus Invisibilis,” 44.

encounter with Hellenism did not necessarily give rise to Jewish anxieties about divine corporeality and visibility, it was certainly catalytic to the development of the Jewish Gettedishre, made orthodox by Maimonides (d. 1204), according to which God is incorporeal and invisible. The HB’s el mistalê or Hidden God is of a different kind. He is hidden behind a veil, a cloud, or a mortal human form precisely because he can be seen and this seeing could be fatal to his elect. This god is corporeal and anthropomorphic, but transcendentally anthropomorphic. The two deities - the transcendently anthropomorphic god of the HB and the transcendently incorporeal god of Hellenistic tradition (Jewish and otherwise) - must not be conflated as we attempt to discover the qur’anic Lehr on the Vision of God.


Chapter III:

Theophany and Visio Dei: the Qur'anic Perspective

3.1. Deus Invisibilis in the Qur'ān?

Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick are sure that, according to the Qur'ān, "God lies beyond the range of our vision."\(^{377}\) According to their reading, divine invisibility in the Qur'ān is ontological: "when the Koran speaks about the ‘unseen,’ it does not seem to mean that which our eyes do not reach in practice, but rather that which our eyes do not reach in principle...God and the angels are invisible."\(^{378}\) Invisible and therefore non-theophanous. Mustansir Mir even suggests that "theophany probably would not have belonged in the theoretical framework of the Qur'ān."\(^{379}\) It is certainly true that, as Tuft observed, the Qur'ān presents no explicit theology on the vision of God.\(^{380}\) It is also true, as van Ess points out, that speculation on the issue began not with the Book but with later Muslim tradition.\(^{381}\) However, the above cited position of Murata and Chittick rests on a number of Qur'ānic passages which appear to speak to the issue (e.g. al-An'ām [6]:103, al-A'rāf [7]:143, al-Baqara [2]:55, al-Nisā' [4]:153). Tuft notes: "Understood literally, all of these passages would seem a fairly direct denial of the possibility of ru'ya"\(^{382}\). Nevertheless, as M. Chodkiewicz notes, "Despite their obvious

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378 Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, 79, 88. See also Singh, *Unseen God*: "God of the Qur'ān is...invisible, inaccessible, and beyond the understanding of human being(s)," and Abd-Allāh, "The Perceptible and the Unseen," 171 for whom God and the angels are al-ghayb, "unseen," because of their "nonmaterial nature."

379 *EQ* 5:275 s.v. Theophany by Mustansir Mir.


382 Tuft, "Origins and Development," 60.
sense, these verses (6:103 and 7:143) were interpreted in many ways in Islamic tradition and, more often than one would expect, in such a way as to safeguard the possibility of the vision of God.  

Is it the case that Islamic tradition eisegetically forced a positive reading on these clearly ‘negative’ passages? Rather than speaking of an ‘obvious’ or ‘literal’ sense of these verses van Ess, more accurately no doubt, speaks of their ‘ambiguity.’ However, we will argue here that a philological and traditio-historical examination throws great interpretive light on these passages and seem to suggest that, rather than being “fairly direct denial(s)” of God’s visibility, these passages affirm, but with qualifications, the possibility of theophany and visio Dei.

3.2. Revelation and Ru’ya

Abdullah Saeed, in his article “Rethinking ‘Revelation’ as a Precondition for Reinterpreting the Qur’an: A Qur’anic Perspective,” argues:

Revelation (in the Qur’an) does not mean that God is making His being known... The Prophet does not ‘see’ God, and such ‘seeing’ is emphatically denied throughout the Qur’an. There is no single instance in the Qur’an which unambiguously declares that, in the process of receiving revelation, the Prophet ‘sees’ God’s being, or that there is a self-manifestation of God. The only instance which could be considered to have any link to such a probable ‘seeing’ (Q.53:1-18) is problematic, as it refers to a ‘seeing’ with the ‘heart,’ not with the eyes.

Saeed makes a number of assumptions that will be examined more closely in this dissertation:

1. Seeing God is ‘emphatically,’ and thus unambiguously denied ‘throughout the Qur’an.’
2. On the other hand, there is not a single unambiguous instance of ru’ya or tajalli in the Qur’an.
3. The only ‘probable’ instance, Q.53:1-18, really is no such case because the instrument of ‘seeing’ was the Prophet’s heart, not his eyes.
4. Thus, ru’ya and tajalli play no part in the Qur’anic perspective on revelation.

383 “En dépit de leur obvité, ces deux versets sont cependant, dans la tradition islamique, interprétés de bien des manières et, plus souvent qu’on ne s’y attendrait, d’une façon qui sauvegarde la possibilité de la vision”: “La vision de Dieu selon Ibn ‘Arabi,” in Chaumont et al., Autour du Regard, 159 [art. 160-172].


More accurate is surely N. Hanif’s measured statement: “The Qur’anic notion of revelation has less to do with the vision of Allah, His person, than with His speech.”*386 The Qur’ān does indeed present itself largely as an auditory revelation.*387 But as Montgomery Watt points out:

(Muhammad’s) experience of revelation was not of a single type, but varied from time to time, even if laterly it came near to a single form. This is the simplest way of accounting for the wide variations in the Qur’ānic language in respect of this matter.*388

The question is, of course, do any of these revelatory ‘types’ involve visionary experiences of God?*389 The Qur’ān’s affirmation of continuity between qur’ānic and ancient Hebrew modes of revelation*390 would suggest so, even if most writers would answer negatively:

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The Qur'an often refers to itself as a 'Reminder.' That is to say, the Qur'an does not consider itself a totally new revelation, but rather a new form of a revelation which has remained consistent throughout the history of God's interaction with man.\(^{391}\)

The important place occupied by theophany and visio Dei in Hebrew prophecy suggests that they at least play some role within the Qur'anic paradigm of prophecy or, to use Mir's words, they must at least "belong to the theoretical framework of the Qur'an,"\(^{392}\) one would think. Otherwise, the Qur'an would stand in radical discontinuity with the revelatory/prophetic tradition of which it claims to be the culmination. This point alone is prima facie evidence warranting a closer look at the relevant passages. If the Qur'an is anything like "a genizah of various trajectories of biblical and near eastern aggadot,"\(^{393}\) can we identify the biblical/near eastern subtext/context of these passages and if so, what light, if any, might they shine on the Qur'anic discourse on divine (in)visibility?

### 3.2.1. Sūrat al-Shūrā [42]: 50: Veiled, not Invisible

It is not for man that God speaks to him (yakallimahu) except by revelation (waazum) or from behind a veil (kiyāh), or by sending a messenger and revealing by His permission what He pleases. Surely He is High, Wise.

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\(^{390}\) 4:163: "Surely We have revealed to you as We have revealed to Noah, and the prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon..." See also 73:15; EQ 4:294 s.v. Prophets and Prophethood by Uri Rubin. Abd-Allah, "The Perceivable and the Unseen," 161 noted as well: "The paradigm of prophecy in Islamic religion is essentially the same as that of the Mosaic prophets of the biblical tradition. In both, the office of prophecy began with a call - often in the form of a vision..."


\(^{393}\) Which Mir himself denied. EQ 5:275 s.v. Theophany.

\(^{394}\) Hughes, "stranger at the sea," 266.
This passage is often taken as the Qur’ān’s own definition of the revelatory process.\(^{394}\) Three modes of communicating, literally “speaking,” to man are enumerated signifying, so it seems, a “gradation of decreasing immediateness.”\(^{395}\) The first is through waḥy, often itself translated as ‘revelation.’ But waḥy in the Qur’ān has a much wider signification than what is generally understood by the term ‘revelation.’\(^{396}\) According to Ibn Manṣūr waḥy can signify inspiration (al-‘ilām), a signal (al-‘ishārāt), writing (al-kitābāt), hidden speech (al-katām al-khaḍī), or whatever is imparted in a hidden or near hidden manner.\(^{397}\) Of the three ‘modes’ of ‘speaking’ to man waḥy is usually the most direct manner of God’s communication because often no intermediary is involved, in contrast to mode three, which is the sending of an angelic messenger according to commentators.\(^{398}\) While waḥy does not have to involve ruʿya it sometimes does.\(^{399}\) But ruʿya Allāh?

Of particular significance for our discussion is mode two, God’s speaking to man min warāʾi hijābīn, ‘from behind a veil.’ Muslim commentators generally concluded that while God’s kalām remained unobstructed, the veil obscured ruʿya.\(^{400}\) This is interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it is sometimes assumed that the “veil” here is a dream or vision (ruʿya).\(^{401}\) Because God won’t speak directly to man, he communicates through visionary dreams.

\(^{394}\) E.g. Sweetman, Islam and Christian Theology, 1.2., 124; Ibrahim, “Communication Models.”

\(^{395}\) Crollius, Thus Were They Hearing, 41.

\(^{396}\) \(\text{E}^{2}\) 11:53-56 s.v. Waḥy by A.J. Wensinck and Andrew Rippin; \(\text{E}^{4}\) 4:457-448 s.v. Revelation and Inspiration by Daniel A. Madigan; \(\text{E}^{6}\) 7:354-357 s.v. Inspiration (Muslim), by E. Sell.


\(^{398}\) As Daniel A. Madigan observes regarding waḥy in this passage: “The verse indicates that the Qur’ān envisages a process of revelation that does not involve an angelic go-between,” \(\text{E}^{4}\) 4:440 s.v. Revelation and Inspiration; Saeed, “Rethinking Reelation,” 100. Pace Ibrahim, “Communication Models,” 110.

\(^{399}\) E.g. \(\text{Q}\) 53:1-18; Michael Sells, Approaching the Qur’ān: The Early Reelations (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999) 45; \(\text{E}^{4}\) 4:439 s.v. Revelation and Inspiration by Daniel A. Madigan; \(\text{E}^{2}\) 11:54 s.v. Waḥy by A.J. Wensinck and Andrew Rippin. See also below.


The dreams of prophets are revelation (e.g. Q 37:102), and oneiric theophanies are truthful. More often, at least in traditionalist Sunni circles, the veil is understood literally as a veil that prevents mortals from gazing at God and perishing. As J. Chelhod puts it: the veil was “apparently intended to protect the elect from the brilliance of the Divine countenance.” This motif, we recall, is biblical as well: Yahweh veils his luminosity in a dark cloud in order to protect his elect from its brilliance. The Qur’ān seems to share the biblical/ANE tradition of God’s luminosity: “And the earth is lit up with the light (nūr) of its Lord (39:69); “And Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth (22:35)” “Your Lord’s Face (wa.jā), possessor of Glory (jālāl) and honor, [alone] will survive (55:27).” Jalāl is “suggestive of effulgence.” The veil is light too, but apparently a much dimmer light than that of God’s Jalāl. According to a number of hadith reports the veil protects man from the scorching effulgence of God’s Face. “His (God’s) veil is light. If He would remove it, the august splendor of Allah’s Face would burn everything of his creation to which his glance reaches.” As the Shāfi‘ite traditionalist Muḥammad b. Iḥsāq b. Khuzayma (d. 924) eloquently wrote:

His (God’s) face is that which He described with splendor (lajāl) and venerability (iqrām) in His statement, “The face of your Lord remains, possessor of Splendor, Venerability”... And we say that the face of our Lord (radiates) a brilliant, radiant light (al-nūr wa al-dāyā’ wa-bahā) which, if His veil is removed the glory of His face will scorch everything that sees it.

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404 See below.


406 *EQ* 5:275 s.v. Theophany by Mustansir Mīr.

407 Abū Masā reported from the Prophet: “His veil is light.” Muslim, Saḥḥ, 1:113, #343.

408 Muslim, Saḥḥ, Kitāb al-inšān, 79, 343; Ibn Ṣanjāḥ, Sunan, 1:110 #195.

409 Ibn Kuzayma, Kitāb al-tauhīd, 10f, 22f.
The veil over God’s Face interning between him and man’s vision of him is also called his *ridâ’* al-*kidriyâ‘*, Manotel of Grandeur. This brings to mind the Akkadian *pullû* or *garment of fire and flame,* the dangerously luminous *body* of the Mesopotamian deities. In Paradise “(Allâh) will lift the veil and (the people) will look at Him.” They will not then be harmed by God’s brilliant person.

Abû Sa‘îd: “We asked Allâh’s Messenger: ‘Shall we see our Lord?’ He said: ‘Do you crowd (and press one another) to look at the sun at midday without cloud?’ We replied in the negative. He said: ‘Do you suffer any harm in seeing the moon of the night of full moon without clouds?’ They (the inquirers) said: ‘No, (we feel no harm).’ Then, he said that indeed you would not suffer any harm in seeing Him (the Lord) but to that extent you feel harm in seeing them (the sun and the moon).”

As the scorching brilliance of the midday Sun on a cloudless day does no harm to an onlooker, so the scorching brilliance of the Lord’s person, previously veiled, will do no harm to the dwellers of Paradise rewarded with *nu‘yâ*. But in this world the veil is necessary to protect mortal man according to this traditionalist Sunnî formulation. This may very well be a sectarian reading of the Qur’ânic passage, but Sarah Stroumsa

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410 “Nothing will prevent the blessed from seeing their Lord in the Garden of ‘Ad except the Mantel of Grandeur (*ridâ‘* al-*kidriyâ‘*) covering His face.” Muslim, *Saḥîḥ, i‘mân*, #296; Ibn Majah, *Sunan*, 1:104 # 186.

411 See above.

412 On *wagî Allâh* as *pas pro toto* of God himself see *EQ*:264 s v. Theology and the Qur’ân by T. Nagel [art. =256-275]; J.M.S. Balyon, “’To Seek the Face of God’ in Koran and Hadith,” *AcOr* 21 (1953): 255 [art. =254-266].

appropriately speaks of the natural “connotation théophanique” of the hijāb.414 An invisible, non-theophanic deity does not need a veil.415 If the veil is necessary to obstruct vision, the vision of God is possible under normal circumstances (i.e. unveiled). The vision may be lethal, but it is possible nonetheless.416 Thus in ancient Israel, as the anthropomorphic Yahweh sat in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle/Temple “the veil comes between the glory of God and the eyes of the Israelites, and prevents the latter from seeing.”417 This analogy finds some support from the Qur’ān. At 33:53 the same expression as found in Q 42:50 is used: the believers entering the Prophet’s house must speak to his wives min wa’rā’i hijābīn. The veil is thus no indication of invisibility. Just the opposite seems to be the case. The God of Sunnī tradition, and probably the Qur’ān, needs a veil just as the visible, theophanic God of biblical tradition does: to protect mortal onlookers from his fiery Glory.

3.3. Sūrat al-‘An’ām [6]:103: Seeing vs. Perceiving

lā tudrikhu ‘l-‘asār wa huwa yudrik ‘l-‘asār

‘(Physical) vision [al-‘asār] comprehends Him not, and He comprehends vision’

According to Tuft, “the most literal interpretation of [this] text... seems to declare the impossibility of the vision of God.”418 It is indeed taken as such a declaration in the


415 Thus Saeed’s statement in incoherent: ‘behind a veil’ “means that God speaks to a person without hearer seeing the one who speaks to him, since in his essence God is invisible.” “Rethinking Revelation,” 101. If ‘in his essence’ God was invisible there would be no need of a veil.


Classical literature, particularly by the Mu'tazilites. For Sunnis, however, the verse may qualify the vision of God, but it in no way denies its possibility. What is denied is a vision of God in this world, we are assured, not a vision in the hereafter; or, what is denied is a comprehensive vision, not a mere physical seeing of God. A'drāk/ yudrīk/ i'drāk has the basic meaning 'to overtake, catch up with, catch.' It implies a sense of ultimate or comprehensiveness (e.g. 10:90, 4:78, 100). Sunni scholars therefore not inappropriately equated i'drāk in this verse (6:103) with iḥāta, "encirclement, encompassment." Idrāk is thus understood as a 'total seeing' versus ra'ya which is understood as a general, limited seeing. For the Sunni mutakallim Abū Mansār al-Māturīdī (d. 944), for instance,

ra'ya denotes the perceptible presence of a thing, while i'drāk denotes perception of the thing as a whole, including its boundaries. God...is perceptible in the sense of ra'ya but not in the sense of i'drāk; verse VI:103 merely acknowledges this fact. It does not rule out the vision (ra'ya) of God.414

Mu'tazili theologians rejected this distinction, arguing that lā fāraqa bayna 'i'-idrāk w'al- ra'ya, "there is no difference between i'drāk and ra'ya." But that there is a difference is supported by Q 26:61-62:

So when the two groups saw each other (tarā'a) the companions of Moses cried out,
"Surely we shall be overtaken (mu'drakūna)." He said: "By no means! Surely my Lord is with me - He will guide me."


411 Tuft, "Origin and Development," 91-98


413 E.W. Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society), 1:873-874 s.v. ḥaḍār.


Here, the distinction between *nu'ya* and *idrāk* is instructively affirmed. *Ru'ya* did occur between the two groups—the passage declares it—but *idrāk* will not, according to Moses' prophetic guarantee. The Ḥanāfī *qādi* Ṭālī b. Ṭalī b. Abī al 'Izz (d. 1390) therefore observed regarding this passage: “Moses doesn’t deny being seen (*nu'ya*). He only denied that they would be overtaken (*idrāk*).” The *qādi* concludes: “One can see Allāh but cannot grasp Him, just as one can know Him but cannot comprehend Him.”\(^{426}\) Regarding *ṣūrat al-Anʿām* [6]:103 Ibn Ḥajar concludes: “the intent of the verse is the denial of encompassment (*idhāna*) of Him by means of vision (*nu'ya*), not the denial of the theoretical basis (*aṣl*) of a vision of Him.”\(^{427}\)

3.3.1. Seeing and Not Perceiving

In the Qur'ān the locus of comprehension is the heart, not the eyes (6:25; 17:46; 18:57; 63:3);\(^{428}\) “hearts they (i.e. those destined for Hell) do not use for comprehension (*kā yafqahāna bihā*), eyes they do not use for sight, ears they do not use for hearing (*7:179*).” When God veils the heart of the wrongdoer, even though his eyes may see he will not perceive or comprehend what he sees (22:46; 6:25; 9:127).

Seeing could be disbeliefing if the hearts spiritual vision is obscured by darkness...Those who believe have true vision because their hearts perceive the spiritual reality of the unseen consequences of action.\(^{429}\)

*Ṣūrat al-Anʿām*'s [6]:103 exclusion of a role to *al-ābṣār* (physical vision) in *idrāk* (comprehension/apprehension) is consistent with the Qur'ān’s overall position that the eyes are not the instrument of comprehension. *Ru'ya* is therefore not at issue here except by implication: one may see God, but this seeing (*al-ābṣār*) does not guarantee

\(^{426}\) Ibn Abī al 'Izz, *Sahih al-'aqāida al-Tahāwīya*, 1:57 (= Commentary, 125).

\(^{427}\) Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 8:607. See also al-Nawawai: “*idrāk* is *idhāna* and Allāh Most High is not encompassed by *nu'ya* (vision). Hence, the text (6:103) furnishes a denial of encompassment (*idhāna*). The denial of non-encompassing *nu'ya* does not necessarily follow from that” (in *Ṣaḥīḥ Mālik*, 2:11) and further the position of the Ash'arite theologian Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 1110): “Perception in the strict sense (*al-īdāh al-haqqīn*) is that which presents the perception as it really is and when it presents it differently than it really is it is an illusion (*akhyayūn*) and in this case the word *nu'ya* is employed in an extended sense (*ta'awasul*): *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibrāhīm*, quoted in Frank, “Perceiving and Perception,” 24.

\(^{428}\) *EQ* 2:407 s.v. heart by Jane Dammen McAuliffe.

\(^{429}\) *EQ* 5:447 s.v. Vision and Blindness by S. Kugle.
comprehension (iddāk). The Shafi'iite polymath Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani (d. 1396) perceptively took note of this implication:

If we make the perception (al-iddāk) an expression for vision from the standpoint of encircling one from all sides and boundaries, then the verse ( sûrat al-Asrâr [6]:103) indicates that the Vision is allowable, nay rather it is verified even more clearly as real, for the meaning is that Allah although seen, is not perceived by the eyes because He is exalted of Himself above being limited and described by boundaries and sides.\footnote{430}

This distinction between seeing God and perceiving him “as he really is” also has strong traditio-historical support. The gods of the ancient pantheons were said to walk the earth disguised as mortals.\footnote{431} Thus “ancient man could never be sure whether the person he was talking with was not actually a god in (mortal) disguise.”\footnote{432} As noted above, this mortal disguise was (at least partly) for the protection of the human recipient of the theophany; the divine form puts humans in peril, therefore a more ‘mundane’ or, to use Esther Hamori’s term, ‘anthropomorphically real’ form is assumed for their protection.

In such encounters, the human would see and not see – or, rather, not perceive – the god.

It is as if Homer interposed two stages between divine and human dimensions. One purely physical in which a hero could see god... The other involved mental recognition... Ordinarily in this world, and even in the next, seeing someone and recognizing him were two logically linked steps... For man to see a god, however, either in his real form or in disguise, and to recognize his identity were difficult barriers to cross...

What qualities then were needed to penetrate the disguise...? Very often the answer to this question is perfectly ordinary without any hint of mysterious powers. An alert mortal could read the signs, make the necessary deductions, and reach a likely conclusion regarding the divine presence.\footnote{433}

In Indic tradition the gods must bestow on a seer a ‘divine eyesight (çakṣur diyam)’ so that he may perceive the gods as they truly are in their ‘divine form (rūpaṃ alsvaran).’\footnote{434}

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\footnote{431}{“Essentially anthropomorphic, the gods stalked the world as mortals, disguising themselves so well that people could never be totally sure that a stranger was all that he seemed.” Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987) 106.}

\footnote{432}{Versnel, “What Did Ancient Man See,” 46.}


\footnote{434}{Laine, Visions of God, 239-40.}
When Arjuna requested to behold Lord Kṛṣṇa’s luminous ‘universal form’ the god answered:

But with your own eyesight, you cannot see me — I grant you [then] a divine eyesight. Now, see my sovereign power! But as James W. Laine pointed out, this ‘divine eyesight’ is more cognitive than ocular:

divine eyesight is more than simply a special visual capacity to see the divine supernal form, but it is the quality of insight, a faculty which allows the ‘seer’ to gain a divine perspective on the nature of things.

The same motif is found in Homeric tradition.

Men...must be wise to perceive a god, for the gods remain hidden from those who are not ‘in the know’.

On this reading sūrat al-ʾArḍām [6]:103 is not a “fairly direct denial of the possibility of nayr” as Tuij assumed nor does the positive interpretation offered by later Sunnī exegetes seem far off the mark. The passage would be a Qur’ānic articulation of the ANE/Mediterranean/habilic motif of seeing but not perceiving the deity as he really is. As Ḥikrīma (d. 723-4), freed slave of the famed Companion of the Prophet and “Interpreter of the Qur’ān,” Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 638), related:

Ibn ʿAbbās said, “He saw Him descend another time (Q. 53:13),” meaning the Prophet saw his Lord. A man said to [Ḥikrīma]: “Didn’t He say, ‘Vision comprehends Him not and He comprehends all vision’ (Q. 6:105).” Ḥikrīma said to him: “Do you see the sky?” He said yes. He said, “[Do] you see all of the sky[?]”

The meaning here is clear. Like al-Māturīdī in the 10th century and others, Ḥikrīma distinguishes between ṣirāk which, for our exegete, implies a total perception of a thing,

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435 Mahākānata 6.33.8; trans. Laine, Visions of God, 136. This very motif appears in Muslim commentaries on sūrat al-ʾArḍām [6]:103. Al-Qurṭubī, for instance, argued that it is possible to see God, but ordinary vision cannot attain him. God therefore creates in certain men — like Muhammad — a special eyesight by which they can perceive him. Muhammad al-Qurṭubī, al-ʾJamāʾ li-ḥakkām al-Qur’ān. 29 vols. (Caire: Muḥāfaẓat Dār al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1967) 7:54, 278-60.

436 Laine, Visions of God, 240.


and mu'ja which is the simple act of seeing. To see a thing with the eyes does not imply that the viewed is fully perceived (idrāk) by the viewer. What is certain is that sūrat al-An'ām’s denial here of a role to physical vision in the process of comprehending (idrāk)’

God does not necessarily suggest an invisible deity. The eye failed also to comprehend the otherwise visible, corporeal gods of Indic/Mediterranean mythic tradition.

3.4. Sūrat al-'Arāf [7]:143: Divine Visibility and Human Peril

And when Moses came at Our appointed time and his Lord spoke to him, he said: “My Lord, show Yourself to me that I may look upon You (awānī anzumu itayka).” [God] said:

“You can’t see Me (jan tarānī); but look at the mountain. If it remains in its place then you will see Me. So when his Lord appeared (tājallā) to the mountain He made it crumble (julalū ḍakkān) and Moses fell dumbruck on account of the lightning (wa-khara Masā’ūm al-‘iyn)”. Then when he recovered, he said: Glory to You! I turn to You, and I am the first of the believers!

Like sūrat al-An’ām [6]:103, this verse (al-'Arāf [7]:143) is often read as an affirmation of God’s invisibility. This passage is usually read in conjunction with surat al-Baqarah [2]: 55-56 and surat al-Nisā’ [4]: 153 (see below). Tuft suggested:

Understood literally, all of these verses (7:143, 2:55-56, 4:133) would seem a fairly direct denial of the possibility of mu’ja, and they also appear to brand as disgraceful even the request made for it.

A closer reading of these passages in the context of the possible biblical/Jewish subtext suggests a different conclusion: these passages actually affirm mu'ja, but they affirm also the lethal consequences of mu'ja.

Sūrat al-'Arāf [7]:143 is a qur'ānic version of the events on Mount Sinai recorded in Exodus 33-18-23. As we have demonstrated above the biblical version does not deny God’s visibility. The issue addressed there is the violent incompatibility between God’s holiness and Israel’s sinful impurity resulting from the Golden Calf incident. The encounter between the two impenetrable. A theophany does take place on Mount Sinai, but one involving the “gracious suspension of the nominal threat.” That is to say, no


longer able to bear a vision of Yahweh's fiery *kabodlpanim* (Glory/Face), Moses and Israel must satisfy themselves with the vision of his less radiant and therefore more accommodating *'ahôr*, "Back." But the difference between the biblical and Qur'anic narratives is not that the former involves theophany and the latter does not. As Mustansir Mir admits: "In the Qur'ân, the closest one comes to a visible appearance of God is Q. 7:143."442 The difference is that the Qur'anic narrative lacks the "suspension of the nominal threat" featured in the biblical narrative.

The key phrase is: "So when his Lord appeared (*tajallâ*) to the mountain He made it crumble (*ja'ala ru'a dakkânâ*)." The verb *tajallâ* is Form V of the root *j-a-l*, "to appear, come to light, to be clear or brilliant, apparent, manifest."443 *Tajalliti l-shams*, for instance, is "The sun became unobscured, exposed to view, ceased to be eclipsed."444 *Surat al-A'raf* [7]:143 is thus literally a theophany narrative. As Mir reluctantly admits again: "Thus, in reference to Q 7:143, the most one can say is that God did manifest himself on the mountain but that Moses was unable to see him (emphasis mine — WW)." Was Moses unable to see him or unable to *baar seeing* him?

*Tajallâ* may also be read as "He manifested his *jâlî*, Majesty." As Mir points out, *jâlî* "comes closest to being the Qur'anic term for glory."445 The term *tajallâ* used in 7:143 is therefore "suggestive of effulgence."446 As pointed out above the Qur'ân seems to share the biblical tradition of God's luminosity. Some commentators read *tajallâ rabî'hu bil-jâbal* (7:143) as *tajallâ bi-nûrî*, "He manifested by light."447 But it was only a small portion of his light, tradition tells us: the equivalent of his little finger,448 for "if the god chooses to be

442 *EQ* V:275 s.v. Theophany by Mustansir Mir.
443 Lane, *Arabic—English Lexicon* 1:446 s.v. *jâlî*; *EF* 16:60 s.v. *Tajallâ* by E. Geoffroy.
444 Lane, *Arabic—English Lexicon* 1:446 s.v. *jâlî*.
445 *EQ* 2:315 s.v. Glory by Mustansir Mir.
446 *EQ* 5:275 s.v. Theophany by Mustansir Mir.
447 Lane, *Arabic—English Lexicon* 1:446 s.v. *jâlî*. See also Muhammad Farid Wajid, *Al-Qurân al-Mufassar* (Cairo, 1903) 2:14: "The intent of this (passage, 7:143) is not that God appeared (*zahani*) to the mountain, but that he struck near it with a beam of light."
448 See e.g. Ibn Kathîr who reports in his *Tafsîr* on this verse a hadîth from 'Ibn Hanbal's *Munad* according to which the Prophet said concerning "And when his Lord appeared to the mountain": *hâkadâh* ("like this").
seen in all his majesty, only the tiniest bit of the splendor of the god's size, stature, beauty and radiance can be allowed to filter through, and this already enough to strike the spectator with *thambes*, superfection, to plunge him into a state of reverential fear.” This is precisely what we read here: *wa-qaarran Mūsā šā'iqan*, “then Moses fell dumbstruck on account of the lightning.” *šā'iq* is a lightning bolt when it burns a human or fire that falls from the sky with a terrible thunder-clap (see 2:55-56, 4:153) or maybe from God’s *jalāl*. This is reminiscent of the destructive fire emanating from Yahweh’s *kābūl*. Moses’ inability to see God (*lan tarāfi*) would then be due to God’s unbearable effulgence from which the destructive *šā'iq* emerges, not ontological invisibility. Nature’s convulsion and the leveling of mountains is a characteristic feature of biblical theophanies. “The mountains quake before Him, the hills melt (Na. 1:5)”; “The mountain saw Thee and writhed *yāhūb* (Hab. 3:10)”; “His lightnings lighten the world; the earth sees and writhes. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of the earth (Ps. 97:4-5).” Samuel Loewenstamm, in his study of “The Trembling of Nature during the Theophany,” notes: “the Biblical passages...all speak of the magnificence of the glory of God at whose terrifying appearance the whole world...either trembles or is rent asunder.” Read in this light *sūrat al-A'raf* [7]:143 is an account of an actual theophany and its tragic consequences to man and nature. As the Mālikī jurist al-Qayrawānī (d. 996) said in his creed: “God addressed Moses by His speech, which is an attribute of His

then he held out the tip of his little finger. The conclusion is that “only the extent of the little finger appeared to (Moses).” See *Tafsir Ibn Kathi* (Abridged) 4:156-157 (*ad Sūrat al-A'raf*).


450 Lane, *Lexicon* 1:1690 s.v. *مصَفَّر*; *EQ* 2:212 s.v. Fire by Heidi Toelle.


452 Loewenstamm, “The Trembling of Nature,” 177. It is thus not necessary to resort here to the old idea that God endow inanimate objects with sight in order to explain the leveling of the mountain at the appearance of God, as did Tuft, “Origins and Development,” 23 (see e.g. Baydāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, ed. M. Anwar [Cairo, 1353 AH] 221: “It is said that God endowed the mountain with life and sight, so that it saw Him.”)
essence, not one of His creatures. He appeared to the mountain and it became leveled at
His Majesty.” 453

This point is illustrated unmistakably by the classical muṣafīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). In his
treatment of our passage al-Ṭabarī quotes a lengthy tradition that Ibn Ishāq reputedly got
from “a certain expert in the traditions of the People of the Book (ba‘d ahl ‘ibn al-ainwal
bi‘ahādith ahl al-kīāb).” 454 Al-Ṭabarī cites this tradition approvingly. 455 After asking God for
a vision of his Face (waqī) God replies: “Do you know what you are saying, son of ‘Imrān?
I have spoken to you directly, which is a greater thing than [any granted] to another
creature. No one sees me and lives after!” Moses repeats the request, adding that death at
the sight of God is preferable to living having not seen him. God finally relents and directs
Moses to a large crevice in a rock, “that Moses might not be burned up, li‘allā yaḥiariq
Mūsā.” The dramatic scene now begins. God sends down six successive ranks of angels,
each more terrifying than the former. After the second rank of angels stands Moses’ hair
on end he tries to withdraw his request. An angel retorts, however: “Endure what you
demanded, Mūsā!” After the sixth rank descends, God commands the angels: “pass me
over My servant that he may see Me (marrī bi‘alā ‘abāb li‘yarrā).” 456 As the light of God’s
throne envelops the mountain and the angels raise their voices in chorus, the mountain
shakes and falls to pieces. Moses is struck dead. After God revives him Moses repents: “I
confess that none can see you and live.” Tuft rightly points out: “The narrative concludes
with Moses repenting because the sight of God is fatal, not because it is impossible.” 457

For al-Ṭabarī, M. Chodkiewicz notes, the theophany on Sinai that pulverized the


mountain demonstrates, not God’s invisibility, but mortals’ radical inability to support such a vision.\textsuperscript{459} Qâdi ‘Iyâd’s point is therefore plausible:

This verse...means that Moses saw Allah and that is why he fell down in a swoon...His manifestation to the mountain was His appearance to Moses so that, according to this statement, he actually saw Him.\textsuperscript{459}

This interpretation of the Qur’anic narrative is consistent with a plain reading of the narrative and its likely biblical subtext.

3.5. \textit{Surat al-Baqarah} [2]: 55-56 and \textit{Surat al-Nisā’} [4]: 153; \textbf{Israel as Victims of Theophany}

And remember you (Israel) said: “O Moses! We shall never believe in thee until we see God openly (\textit{jahartum}).” So the lightning (\textit{ṣā’iyah}) overtook them as they looked on.

Then we raised you up after your death that you may be grateful. (2:55-56)

The People of the Book ask thee (Muhammad) to cause a book to descend to thee from heaven; indeed they asked Moses for an even greater (miracle), for they said: “Show us God openly (\textit{jahartum}).” So lightning (\textit{ṣā’iyah}) overtook them on account of their zulm. Then (\textit{humma}) they worshipped the calf after clear signs had come to them. We pardoned this. And We gave Moses clear authority. (4:153)

The literal reading of these verses, Tuft suggests, “brands as disgraceful even the request for \textit{ru‘ya},” as it is “put in the mouth of rebellious jews (\textit{sic}) as a sort of verbal golden calf.”\textsuperscript{460} \textit{Surat al-A‘rāf} [7]: 143 is usually read in the context of these passages. The Mu’tazilites, who seem to have been the first to do so,\textsuperscript{461} argued that Moses, who well knew that God is invisible, only requested to see him at the behest of his people who clamored to see God face-to-face. Moses accordingly hoped to solicit from God a dramatic denial.\textsuperscript{462} This ignorant request elicits God’s furious anger. “Had they asked for

\textsuperscript{459} “La vision de Dieu selon Ibn ‘Arabî.” in Chaumont et al., \textit{Autour du Regard}, 160-72.


\textsuperscript{460} See Tuft, “Origins and Development,” 60.

\textsuperscript{461} Ibid., Chapter Seven.

something possible,” al-Zamakhshari informs us, “they (Israel) would not have been
called ‘wrong doers’ (i.e. Q 4:153, from zu’lm).”

It seems unlikely that this is a correct reading of these passages. The biblical/rabbinic
subtexts here suggests a reading more consistent with the plain sense of surat al-A’rāf [7]
143: the sa’iqah that strikes and kills the onlookers (“as they looked on,” tanzurūna, Q 2:55)
derived from the jalāl of God. The people died, not because they asked for an ontological
impossibility and were therefore punished, but because they presumptuously demanded
that which they were, in their mortal state, constitutionally unable to bear. They thus
became, in Kunz’s words, ‘victims of the theophanic encounter.’ The biblical/rabbinic
subtexts also shine a light on other aspects of these passages: why was believing in Moses
made contingent upon seeing God “openly,” jahratun? What does seeing God “openly”
mean or imply? On account of what “wrong-doing” (zu’lm) were the Jews struck and killed
by the sa’iqah?

3.5.1. The Biblical Subtext

Three months after departing Egypt Israel entered the wilderness of Sinai and
camped at the foot of the mountain (Exodus 19:1). Calling from the mountain, God
instructs Moses to tell his people that if they obey his word and keep his covenant they
would be made “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The people respond:
“Everything the Lord says, we will do (vv. 5-8).” God then informs Moses:

Behold, I will come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak to
you, and believe you forever…

Then the Lord said to Moses: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and
tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. And let them be ready for the third day. For
on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people
(vv. 9-11).”

The purpose of this theophany “in the sight of all the people” is to put fear in the hearts
of Israel for God and, therefore, confirm Moses’ prophetic role (make the people “believe

in” or “trust in” [Hiph. ב וְגַנָּה Moses]. The thick cloud (‘ub {אֱָ֣וָ֣נָה} covering the kābōd, like the boundaries set to keep the people from coming too close to the mountain (vv. 12-13), is clearly for the protection of the people relatively fresh out of idolatrous Egypt and therefore unable to withstand a direct visionary encounter with the divine Glory. This is indicated, for example, in vv. 20-22:

20 Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. 21 And the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the Lord, and many of them perish. 22 Also let the priests who come near the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.”

All of the precautions taken — the established boundaries, the washing of clothes, and the abstaining from sexual relations — all seem to be designed to protect a currently unholy people from the natural and well-known effects of a visual encounter with the holy God. Even the mildly consecrated priests run the risk of Yahweh “breaking out (yifḥāy)” against them, i.e. the flames of Yahweh’s fiery kābōd lashing out and consuming them. After God descended on the mountain on the third day and the people witnessed the seismic and meteorological phenomena, they trembled and said to Moses: “You speak to us, and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die (20:18-18).”

John W. Hilber has pointed out that central to the covenant is Yahweh’s theophanic presence among the people and their response to it. Elliot Wolfson has shown the connection made in Jewish sources between circumcision, which is the mark of the covenant, and the vision of God’s full Glory. The consequence of breaking the covenant is the withdrawing of the divine presence (Exod. 33:3, 14-15); the reward for

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65 See Exod. 24:16-17; Deut. 5:12.


keeping the covenant is an unmediated visual encounter with God (Exod. 24:9-11). Following Israel’s promise to keep the covenant with the words, “All that the Lord said we will do, and we will hear (24:7),” the covenant is ratified by the sprinkling of blood on the people. As E. Nicholson has argued, the blood rite described in v. 8 likely signified Israel becoming a “holy people to Yahweh.” The successful ratification of the covenant had the effect of changing the state of the people (now they are ‘holy’) and thus their visual access to God. The covenant ceremony therefore climaxes with an unprecedented unmediated visual encounter with God:

24: 9 Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. 10 And they saw the God of Israel. And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, like the very heavens in its clarity. 11 But on the nobles of the children of Israel he (God) did not lay his hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank.

The “seventy elders of Israel” likely represent “the whole of Israel,” thus it is the newly consecrated people who are vouchsafed this unprecedented vívō Dei. “But on the nobles of the children of Israel he (God) did not lay his hand”: that is to say, they did not suffer the normal consequences associated with such a vision. The two canonical encounters with God must be seen in context: in Exodus 19 the still unconsecrated people see God’s kābōd only from a distance and concealed within the cloud. After being “made holy” via the covenant ratification ceremony Israel, through her elders, sees God’s unmediated Glory and suffer no harm (Exodus 24).

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473 Exodus 19 and 24 may have originally reported two different versions of the same event (see below). However, the Priestly canonical narrative, with all of its contradictions, is still clearly intended to be read coherently.
3.5.2. The Rabbinic Subtext

The biblical text provides a quite optimistic reading of Israel at Sinai. Having confessed their obedience to God and the covenant Israel were made holy and consequently granted a direct vision of God, which they were now able to withstand. This canonical account of the events on Sinai is not the only account, however. Indeed, from the canonical narrative itself one may separate multiple and divergent traditions regarding what happened at Sinai that the Priestly redactor artistically brought together as a unified whole.\(^474\) Other traditions tell a more pessimistic story of Israel’s response to God on that day. According to Ps. 78:36-37, Israel simply flattered God when they confessed, “All that the Lord said we will do, and we will hear."

And they flattered Him with their mouth. With their tongues they lied to Him, while their heart was not straight with Him. And they kept no faith with His covenant.

A number of rabbinic texts also accuse Israel of pretense and lip service at Sinai.

(God said to Israel): “Yesterday you pretended. ‘All that the Lord said we shall do, and we shall hear’ and today you declare (of the golden calf): ‘This is your god, O Israel (Exod. 24:7, 32:8).’ Nay, at the very day when they stood at Sinai and said with their mouth, ‘we shall do and we shall hear,’ their heart was intent upon idolatry.”\(^475\)

According to some sources Exod. 19:17, “And they stood beneath the mount,” indicates that God
covered the mountain over them like a basin and said: “If you take upon yourself the Law − good; if not, here will you find your grave” or “if not, I shall force the mountain down upon you and kill you.”\(^476\)

Israel is here presented as being compelled to accept the covenant. As Julian Obermann remarked:


\(^476\) B. Shabb. 88a; B. Ak. Za. 2b, Cont. R. 45a; Obermann, “Koran and Agada,” 35.
The implication...is that Israel had not been quite willing to submit to the covenant of the Law and had to be forced into its acceptance by the mountain threatening to fall upon them.\textsuperscript{477}

According to this alternate tradition of Israel's encounter with God at Sinai, they were not made holy; in their hearts was hypocrisy. The encounter with God therefore ended differently than as presented by the Priestly redactors of the Torah. They did see God's Glory, per their own request, and died.

R. Levi said: Israel asked of God two things – that they should see His glory and hear His voice; and they did see His glory and hear His voice, for it says, And ye said: Behold, the Lord our God hath shewn us His Glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire (Deut. V, 21). But they had no strength to endure [this Revelation], for when they came to Sinai and God revealed Himself to them, their souls fled because He spoke with them, as it says, My soul failed me when He spoke (S.S. v, 6). It was the Torah that pleaded for mercy for them before God: 'Is there a king who gives his daughter (i.e. Torah) away in marriage and slays his own family? The whole world is now rejoicing, yet Thine own children are dead.' Whereupon their souls immediately returned, for it says, The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul (Ps. XIX, 8). R. Levi said: Was it not obvious to God that if He revealed His glory to Israel and made them hear His voice, they would not be able to endure it? God, however, foresaw that they would one day worship idols, and to prevent them pleading, 'Had God shown us His glory and greatness, and made us hear His voice, we would not have worshipped idols' – for this reason does it say, 'Hear, O My people, and I will speak.'\textsuperscript{478}

Here we learn, as also alleged in the Qur'ān, that Israel specifically asked to see God's glory, kabbād. Also as in the Qur'ān, but contrary to the biblical narrative, Israel were not able to endure the encounter and therefore died. They were resurrected however, as was the case with the Qur'ānic Israel. In other rabbinic sources the cause of death is specified as 'burning,' the 'laying of hand' mentioned in Exod. 24:11 ("and upon the nobles of Israel He laid not his hand").\textsuperscript{479}

These biblical and rabbinic sources therefore differ on the status of Israel at Sinai and the outcome of their visual encounter with God. They both agree, however, that Israel saw God's glory. The more optimistic biblical tradition has Israel earning the privilege as

\textsuperscript{477}Obermann, "Koran and Agada," 36.

\textsuperscript{478}Exod. R. 29:4. Soncino translation. See also Exod. R. 41:5.

\textsuperscript{479}Num. R. 15:24.
a result of the successful ratification of the covenant. Other Jewish sources, however, have
Israel giving lip service to the covenant and foolishly asking to see God's kāblā. They
are burned by the glory as they look on and die as a result, victims of the theophany.
Israel are restored by God at the pleading of the personified Torah, as the qur'ānic Israel
are restored.

3.5.3. Qur'ānic Text, Biblical/Extra-Biblical Subtexts

The Qur'ān shares the pessimistic view of Israel's behavior at Sinai. Indeed, as
Obermann has demonstrated, the qur'ānic treatment "resounds the spirit and no doubt
the very words" of the pessimistic rabbinic sources, not the optimistic biblical narrative.
Thus "Agada, over against the Old Testament proper, (is) an indispensable, methodical
criterion for literary and religious-historical criticism of the Koran." The Qur'ān's
Israel likewise gave lip service at the foot of the mountain: they said with their mouths
samīnā wa 'atānā, "we shall hear and we shall obey" (5:7) but said in their hearts samīnā
wa 'ayyānā, "we shall hear and we shall disobey (2:87, 4:48-49)." As in the rabbinic
sources God had to threaten Israel with the mountain hanging above their heads:

And We shook the mountain: over them as if it was a roof, and they thought that it was
falling down upon them. [We said]: Hold with firmness what We have given you and
remember what is in it, perhaps you will become God-fearing. 7:170 (2:60, 4:153)

This pretense and lip service, hypocrisy in short, is likely the zulm on account of which
Israel were struck and killed by the sā'gah, (theophanic) lightning (4:153). They were so
struck "as they looked on, tanzurūnā" Q 2:55, likely meaning "as they looked at God" as in
the biblical and rabbinic traditions. In Classical Greek tradition Semelc wanted to see her
lover the god Zeus in his glorious form. When he appeared to her as she requested,
however, she could not bear the sight: she was struck by lightning and killed. The
qur'ānic Jews insist that they want to see God jahrātn, "openly/face-to-face," which

480 As R. Phineas is given to ask regarding Israel's request: "Does then one comply with the request of a
fool?" Esh. R. 41.3.

481 Obermann, "Koran and Agada," 29.

482 See discussion by Obermann, "Koran and Agada," 31, 40-42.

483 Apollodorus, Libr. 3,4,3; Ovid, Met. 3, 255-315.
suggests that they were not satisfied with the cloud-veiled theophany reported in Exodus 19. Like the Jews of Exod. R. 29.4 they want to see God’s unmediated “glory”; only then will they “believe in” (āmin 1) Moses (2:55). As in the pessimistic rabbinic sources as well, God (likely) showed his unveiled Glory to the presumptuous Jews of Q 2:55 and 4:153 and burned them, making them too victims of the theophany.484 As Morgenstern says regarding the biblical tradition:

The momentary removal of the cloud and the open manifestation of the kehod Jahwe in its undimmed brilliance is... generally the sign of Jahwe’s anger and His immediate punishment of those who had excited his wrath.485

This idea no doubt lies behind this statement Ḥkrīma (d. 723-4) attributes to the famous Companion and “Interpreter of the Qur’ān,” ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās:

When Allāh decides to put fear in the hearts of His creatures, He manifests a part of Himself (abdā ‘an bāṭihi) to the earth and it quakes; but when He wishes to destroy a people, He manifests Himself [fully] to it.486

This partial manifestation that quakes the earth and instills fear is exemplified in sūrat al-Arāf’ [7]:143. Read in the context of the biblical/rabbinic subtext sūrat al-Baqarah [2]: 55-56 and sūrat al-Nisā’ [4]: 153 seem to exemplify God’s genocidal full manifestation. The passages thus do not “brand as disgraceful even the request for muṣā.” The clamorous Jews were not punished because they asked for what was ontologically impossible for God; they were likely punished for insisting on that which they were constitutionally unable to bear. Punished apparently for their hypocrisy and presumption (their zum), their sentence was the granting of their very request for an unmediated muṣā; a display of God’s jaṭīl which scorched them.

484 On these qur’ānic passages as “echos” of the rabbinic tradition of the Israelites death and resurrection at Sinai after seeing God’s Glory see David Halperin, The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision (Tübingen:), C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988) 484.


3.6. Concluding Remarks

Saeed’s claim that seeing God is “emphatically denied throughout the Qur’an” and that “there is no single instance in the Qur’an which unambiguously declares that...there is a self-manifestation of God” is therefore greatly overstated. Upon closer examination none of the passages discussed above ‘emphatically’ deny the possibility of mu‘ja and sūrat al-A‘rāf [7]:143 is in fact that ‘single instance’ where the Qur‘ān declares that there is a self-manifestation of God: fā-lammā tajallā rabbuhu lil-jabali ja‘alahu dakkān. Theophany therefore does belong “in the theoretical framework of the Qur‘ān,” paxe Mustansir Mir.\footnote{\textit{EQ} 5:275 s.v. Theophany.} None of these passages support Murata and Chittick’s claim that God in the Qur‘ān is ontologically invisible.
Chapter IV:

Tajallî wa-Ru'ya: The Qur'ānic Perspective
Part II

4.1. Sūrat al-Najm and the Question of Ru'ya

In the name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful
1. By the star when it sets
2. Your companion errs not, nor does he deviate
3. Nor does he speak out of desire
4. It is indeed revelation (waḥy) that is revealed
5. One mighty in power has taught him
6. Possessor of strength (ṣawā'id al-qawā'id). He/he istiwa
7. While He/he was on the uppermost horizon (al-yiqūq al-dilā)
8. Then He/he drew near, drew nearer still
9. Until He/he was the measure of two bows or closer
10. Then He/he revealed to His servant what He/he revealed.
11. His heart did not lie concerning that which he/it saw.
12. Do you then dispute with him over what he saw?
13. He indeed saw Him/him in another descent
14. At the Lote-tree of the Boundary
15. Near it is the Garden of Repose
16. When that which covers covered the Lote-tree.
17. The eyes turned not aside, nor did they exceed the limit
18. Certainly he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord.

There are a number of studies of sūrat al-Najm's possible meaning(s) and relevance to the Prophet's call and the later Ascension (mūğjalīnā) narratives. The first eighteen verses of this early Meccan passage, which describe an enigmatic visual encounter Muhammad had with an unidentified being, would become the center of debate in the

480 See above n. 24.

489 Though the subject is not explicitly identified in the passages, both Muslim and Western commentators take it for granted that it is the Prophet. “None of the pronouns is identified in these verses, though there is little doubt that the recipient of the vision was Muhammad.” Peters, Muhammad and the Origins of Islam, 142. See also Richard Bell, A Commentary on the Qur'an 2 vols. (edd. C. Edmund Bosworth and M.E.J. Richardson; Manchester, England: University of Manchester, 1991) 2:315.
discussion over whether or not the Prophet saw God in this world (along with sūrat al-Takwīr 81: 15-24, which alludes again to one of these visions; see below). The traditional interpretation reads Jibrīl into the passage, making him the object (marāṭy) of Muhammad’s two visions. Western scholars, primarily for philological reasons, have generally taken these visions to be visions of God. As Muslim and Non-Muslim commentators fundamentally disagree over the interpretation of these verses, a critical examination of Sūrat al-Najm is warranted.

4.2. ‘One Mighty in Power has Taught Him’: Jibrīl or God?

The marāṭy appears to be introduced in v. 5 as ṣhadūd al-qawā, very powerful, and is said to have taught Muhammad (presumably the Qurʾān). Now this could very well describe the angel Jibrīl which, according to the traditional account, mediated all revelation to the Prophet. But the traditional account does not quite square with the qurʾānic data on Muhammad’s revelatory experiences, as pointed out by Charles Adams.

The description of the revelation in the pages of the Qurʾān is somewhat more complex than that set out in the scenario of the traditional account. While it confirms much of the tradition... the Qurʾān also differs from the tradition in important ways...

One example of the differences has to do with the role of Gabriel as the intermediary in the revelation and is, in turn, related to the matter of the Prophet’s visions. Two prophetic visions are mentioned in the Qurʾān, both in surah 53 (1-12 and 13-18), but in neither case does the name Gabriel appear... The matter is more complicated by the fact that Gabriel is mentioned but three (six) times in the Qurʾān, and only in [sura 2:97; a late Medina passage - WW] is he associated with the revelation. Further... Gabriel is not specifically identified in the Qurʾān as an angel, nor does the Qurʾān present the angels


491 Al-Ṭabarî, Jami‘ al-bayān, 27:42.

generally as bearers of revelation.\textsuperscript{493} Neither is the Qur'ān strictly consistent about who is speaking when the revelations are delivered. At times God himself seems to speak directly to the Prophet... In other respects as well there is basis to question whether the Qur'ān gives evidence for the firm stand of tradition.\textsuperscript{494}

In the case of the great prophets preceding Muhammad - Noah, Abraham, and Moses - God seems to address them directly.\textsuperscript{495} Early Meccan passages imply that Muhammad too received revelations from God (73:1-5, 27:6, etc.); sura 55:1-2 even declares that al-Rahmān taught the Qur'ān.\textsuperscript{496} These early suggestions of non-mediated revelation are consistent with the lack of emphasis in the early suras on angelic revelatory participation and,\textsuperscript{497} more significantly, the complete lack of reference to Jibril.\textsuperscript{498}

there is abundant evidence that Muhammad not only did not identify Gabriel as the agent of revelation until his Medina days, but that while at Mecca he was criticized for

\textsuperscript{493} See also Rahman, \textit{Major Themes}, 93-5.

\textsuperscript{494} \textit{ER} 11: 158-59 s.v. Qur'ān: The Text and Its History by Charles Adams [art.=156-176]. On the discontinuity between qu'ranic and later Islamic tradition see also Welch, “Muhammad's Understanding of Himself,” 15-52.

\textsuperscript{495} Rahman, \textit{Major Themes}, 96.

\textsuperscript{496} See also Ibn Kathîr’s discussion, \textit{Tafsîr Ibn Kathîr (Abridged)} 9:377; Welch, “Muhammad’s Understanding of Himself,” 31. While there is the possibility that an angelic mediator is implied in these passages, this seems unlikely. \textit{Sūrat al-Muzzammil} [73]: 1-5 read like a first person address from God to Muhammad. \textit{Sūrat al-Naml} [27]: 6 seems resistant to such an implication as well: “And thou (Muhammad) art surely made to receive the Qur'ān from the Wise, the Knowing.” This is immediately followed, as if as an illustration, by an account of God’s direct conversation with Moses at the sacred valley of Tuwâ (see also 20:1-20).

\textsuperscript{497} Angels are mentioned in the Meccan passages serving diverse roles (e.g. 6:112, 35:1, 42:5, 13:11, etc.). However, the role of messenger from God to humans is excluded by the Early Meccan \textit{sūrat al-Baqi‘ Isrā’īl} [17] 94-95: “And nothing prevents people from believing, when the guidance comes to them, except that they say: Has God raised up a mortal to be a messenger? Say: Had there been in the earth angels walking about secure, We would have sent down to them from the heaven an angel as a messenger.”

\textsuperscript{498} Hyondo Park, “Muhammad’s Call Revisited: A Critical Approach to Muslim Tradition” (MA. thesis, McGill University, 1996) 71: “Although the Qur'ān is silent about the beginning of Muhammad’s call, it does at least offer evidence that the introduction of the angelic messenger for the Qur’ānic revelation or for Muhammad’s vision on the horizon cannot be ascribed to the beginning of Muhammad’s revelatory experience; rather, the hadith involving either Gabriel or the angel from the very beginning of Muhammad’s religious experience seem to be nothing but an expanded exegesis of the Qur’ānic allusions to Muhammad’s religious experiences.” John Clark Archer, \textit{Mystical Elements in Mohammed} (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1924) 83: “it cannot be said that Mohammed made overmuch of Gabriel. He is at most merely included in the revelation, whenever he does figure at all in the record...In the Koran Gabriel is mentioned by name only twice...Both references, it will be noted, are late.” See also Richard Bell and W. Montgomery Watt, \textit{Bell’s Introduction to the Qur’ān} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977) 19.
the fact that God had not sent an angelic messenger...Muhammad’s earliest response did not encourage them to think that there was in fact an angel in God’s revelation to him.\footnote{Peters, *Muhammad*, 145. See also Bevan, “Mohammad’s Ascension to Heavean,” 52; Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 42.}

This is certainly the case. Muhammad’s (or God’s) retort to the Meccan criticism that an angel had not been sent to with him leaves no room to doubt: at this early period Muhammad knew of no angelic mediation:

And nothing prevents people from believing, when the guidance comes to them, except that they say: “Has God raised up a mortal to be a messenger?” Say: “Had there been in the earth angels walking about secure, We would have sent down to them from the heaven an angel as a messenger.” Q 17:94-95

And they say: “Why has not an angel been sent down to him?” And if We send down an angel, the matter would be decided and then they would not be respited. And if We had made him an angel, We certainly would have made him a man, and (thus) made confused to them what they confuse. Q 6: 8-9.

And they say: “O thou to whom the Reminder is revealed, thou art indeed najūn (possessed by a jinn). Why bringest thou not the angels to us, if thou art of the truthful?”

We send not angels but with truth, and then they would be respited. Q 13: 6-8.

And they say: “What a Messenger is this? He eats food and walks about in the markets. Why has not an angel been sent down to him to be a warner with him? Or a treasure given to him, or a garden from which to eat?” And the evildoers say: “You follow but a man bewitched!” Look at how they give you parables – they have gone astray, so they cannot find a way. Blessed is He Who if He please, will give thee what is better than this: Gardens wherein rivers flow. And He will give thee palaces. Q 25: 7-10.

Thus, when confronted with the specific criticism that an angel had not been sent to him, and that he was therefore najūn, i.e. he received his mantic communications from a jinn or Shaytān,\footnote{On this meaning of najūn see Welch, “Muhammad’s Understanding of Himself,” 27.} instead of disabusing his detractors of this erroneous belief by affirming that an angel actually had been sent to him, Muhammad is made to explain:

(A) Angels are sent to angels as messengers, not to humans.

(B) If God did send an angel to him, this would have two consequences that are clearly not part of the divine plan: (1) the matter would be decided and therefore no respite would be
available to the disbelievers and (2) because angels themselves appear as men, sending an
angel would only further confuse a situation that the detractors had already confused.
(C) After dismissing this and other criticisms as the going astray of evil doers it is affirmed
that, if God pleases, he would give the Prophet something better than what the detractors
demand.

These responses simply do not square with the Jibrillocentric account of Muhammad’s
early prophecy. As Alford Welch observes:

It is striking that the only response the Koran gives to these accusations that Muhammad
was inspired by jinn or demons consists of simple denials of the charge and affirmations
that the revelation came from God. There are no references to any intermediary agents of
revelation.501

The early Meccan sûrat al-Najm should therefore not be read in the light of the two late
(Medinan) qur’anic references to Jibril.502

Nor are the traditional sources unanimous regarding Jibril’s early role. According to
some reports, which are more consistent with the qur’anic data, Muhammad did not see
Jibril until the late Meccan or early Medinan period.503 According to other traditions

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501 Welch, “Muhammad’s Understanding of Himself,” 27. See e.g. Q 38:43: “No! I swear by what you see
and by what you don’t see. It is the discourse of a noble messenger; it is not a poets discourse, nor a kahins
discourse ~ a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.”

502 Bell, “Muhammad’s Visions,” 149-50: “There is no doubt that in Medina Muhammad let it be
understood that it was Gabriel who conveyed the revelations to him. But we are hardly justified in
reading that back into the early Meccan period. When the objection was raised that an angel
should have been sent as a messenger, or at least an angel should have been conjoined with him,
his reply is, not an angel is actually conveying the messages to him, but simply that all former
messengers have been men, xvi:45, or that if an angel had been sent, that would have been the
end of the matter, and there would have been no respite, v.18. See also Rahman, Major Themes, 94-
97: “the standard revelatory experience of the Prophet was a matter of the ‘heart’...The term ‘angel’ is,
strictly speaking, not quite accurate for the agent of Revelation sent to Muhammad...the Qur’ân does not
mention (angels) as agents of Revelation...There is no doubt that the agent of Revelation to Muhammad is
this ‘Spirit.’ The Meccans...often asked of Muhammad that an ‘angel be sent down upon him,’ to which
the Qur’ân often replied that angels cannot be sent to humans as prophets (sometimes the Qur’ân also
threatened that ‘we do not send angels except with the final Decision and in that case they [the Prophet’s
opponents] will not be given respite’ [15:81]). It is, therefore, certain that angels did not come to the
prophet – his Revelation came from the Holy Spirit, also described as the ‘Trusted Spirit’ [26:193],”

503 Muslim, Sahih, kitâb ol-faṣâ’il (Book 28), bâb: ‘am al-qân li-nahây (s) bi-Makkah wa-l-Madina (CMLXXI,
#5899), on the authority of Ibn ‘Abâs: “Allah’s Messenger (s) stayed in Mecca for fifteen years and he
heard the voice of Gabriel and saw his radiance for seven years but did not see any visible form, and then
received revelation for ten years, and he stayed in Medina for ten years.” In an earlier version of this report
the sounds and radiance are not even identified as that of the angel Jibril: Yahyâ b. ‘Abdâd < Hammâd b.
Sulama < Ibn ‘Abâs: “Verily the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, said: ‘O Khâidjah I hear sounds

105
Jibrîl was not even the first angel Muhammad encountered: it was Michael or Sarafel or maybe Israfil who first instructed him into the prophetic trade. Some present God himself revealing the Qur'ân to Muhammad. These data simply do not support the early, central role attributed to the angel Jibrîl in Muhammad's early revelatory experiences, as Welch concludes: “The evidence of the Koran does not support the later Hadith accounts that place Gabriel at the very beginning of Muhammad's prophetic experience.”

4.3. 'He Revealed to His Servant': Evidence of Theophany

It is thus inconsistent with the Qur'anic data to read the angel Jibrîl into this early passage and identify him as the marây of these early Meccan visionary encounters. As Fazlur Rahman already pointed out, “Those Hadith stories...where the angel Gabriel is depicted as a public figure conversing with the Prophet...must be regarded as later fictions” (see below). Who then did Muhammad see on the horizon and at the Lotetree of the Boundary? His own shadow projected on the horizon? A pagan numen?

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504 Abû Bâkî ‘Abd al-Razzâq, al-Muṣâmaq, 12 vols. (Johannesburg, South Africa: al-Majîs al-‘Imârî, Beirut: tawzî al-Maṭba‘ al-Islâmî, 1983) 3:599 #5785 on the authority of al-Shâ‘î: “Mikâ‘î entrusted the Messenger of God, when he was 40; he taught him the fundamentals of prophethood (asbâb al-nubuwwa) for three years. When he was 43 Jibrîl came to him in Mecca ten years and in Medina ten years.” On Sarafel see Ibn Sa‘d, Kitâb al-Tabaqât al-Kabîr (trans. S. Moinul Haq and H. K. Ghazanfar, Karachi, Pakistan Historical Society, 1967-) 225. This latter is a call-report.

505 “Ibn ‘Abbâs: God has sent down the Qur’ân to the lowest heaven on the night of divine decree, and whenever He wanted to reveal anything of it He revealed it.” Al-Ṭabarî, Ġam‘î, 11:84-5; Ibn Abî Shaybah, al-Kitâb al-muṣâmaq fî al-ṭâhîr wa-al-‘âlîh, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-Tîmîya, 1989) 7:191. Compare this with Ibn Manda, Kitâb al-imân. 2 vols. (Beirut, 1996) 2: 765: “Ibn ‘Abbâs: The Qur’ân was sent down in one piece from the preserved tablet to the lowest heaven and then Jibrîl revealed it to Muhammad.” The angel has here replaced God in the revelation of the Book once it has been sent to the lowest heaven. For a discussion of these and similar traditions see further Aliza Shinzer, “Sacralinity and Collection,” in Rippin, Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ân 159-171, esp. 162.

506 Welch, “Muhammad’s Understanding of Himself” 29.

507 Rahman, Major Themes, 97; Park, “Muhammad’s Call Revisited,” 71.


One of the supernatural beings described to Muhammad by Jews and Christians "On the contrary" wrote W.H.T. Gairdner, "No one can read these two passages (suras 53 and 81) without feeling that Muhammad's awful visitant on those two occasions was the One of absolute supreme rank in the heavens." According to David A. Madigan "the most straightforward reading (of surat al-Najm) indicates a vision of God." For Western scholars beginning with B. Schrieke v. 10, "So He revealed to His servant what he revealed," is decisive proof that Muhammad, at least in the early period of his mission, understood these visions as theophanies. Bell argued in 1934:

Who then was it that had thus appeared to him? Moslem interpretation assumes that Gabriel is meant. That is natural on the orthodox theory of how the Qur'an was revealed. But v. 10 points to its having been Allah himself. In that verse, the Moslem commentators have to assume that the subject of the verb is Gabriel, but that the pronoun "his" in "his servant" refers to Allah - surely an unnatural use of language. The pronoun indeed must refer to Allah, for Muhammad is Allah's servant, not Gabriel's. But this involves that Allah is also the subject of the verb, and in fact is being spoken of all through.

W.M. Watt and Josef van Ess will later concur. This argument is quite compelling. There are three unidentified pronouns in this verse ('he revealed/his servant/he revealed). Classical Muslim exegetes indeed agreed that 'abâdî is a reference to Muhammad and the

II; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001]

510 Maxime Robinson, Muhammad (New Presz, 2002) 77 suggested "that what Muhammad saw and heard may have been the supernatural beings described to him by the Jews and Christians with whom he talked."


515 Watt notes that " 'His servant' must mean God's servant, as is agreed by Muslims; but that makes the construction awkward unless God is also the implied subject of the verbs (Muhammad at Mecca, 42)." Van Ess argues " 'His servant' can only be God's servant there, namely Muhammad. This would imply that 'he' who revealed was not the 'noble messenger'; and since 'he' who revealed was identical with him who had been seen He who had been seen had to be God Himself (Muhammad's Ascension, 8)." See also ER 11:158 s.v. Qur'an: The Text and its History by Charles J. Adams.
possessive pronoun a reference to God. The most straightforward reading of the verse then would be to assume that the other two pronouns, i.e. the subjects of the verb āwhā, are God as well; thus, “He revealed to His servant that which He revealed.” This is the reading of al-Baghwā, al-Qurṣūbī, and al-Suyūṭī. This reading however, forces the conclusion that it is in fact God who is being discussed throughout the passage, unless one assumes one antecedent (Jibril) for the preceding pronouns in vv. 5-9, and another (God) for the pronouns of v. 10. Three hermeneutical stratagems were later introduced in order to avoid the doctrinal difficulty involved with the straightforward reading. Some exegetes read two antecedents for the three pronouns of this verse, “he (Jibril) revealed to His (God’s) servant that which he (Jibril) revealed.” Others read, “he (Jibril) revealed to His (God’s) servant (Muhammad) that which He (God) revealed to him (Jibril).” Still others, though preferring the natural reading of one antecedent (God) for the pronouns, introduced Jibril as an implied medium (zāsilta), thus reading; “God revealed to His servant Muhammad, by means of Jibril (āla kām Jabrīl or bi-wāsītati Jabrīl), that which He revealed.”

These hermeneutical stratagems are grammatically cumbersome and smack of subterfuge - an apparent exegetical attempt to avoid the implications of the plain text. Tor Andrae aptly described them as the commentators “desperate way out (verzweifelte auswege)” of the implications of the plain reading of this passage.

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517 Al-Baghwā, Tafsīr al-Baghwā, 4: 246.


519 Al-Suyūṭī, Tafsīr al-durr al-manṣūr, 7: 646.


521 Thus al-Ṭabarī, Jāmīʿ al-bayān, 27: 47.

522 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān, 7: 448.

Quṭrubī, and al-Suyūṭī rejected them. There is likely a single antecedent to the pronouns of v. 10, God, a fact that compels us to read God as the antecedent to the pronouns of vv. 6-9: “He (God) ʾistawā, while He/he (God/Muḥammad?) was on the highest horizon. Then He (God) drew near and hung suspended, until He/he (God/Muḥammad) was the measure of two bows or closer. Then He (God) revealed to His (God’s) servant (Muḥammad) that which He (God) revealed.”

The grammatical phenomenon ʾiltifāʿ, while recognized as a ‘daring’ rhetorical feature of qur’ānic discourse, fails to account for the unannounced shift in antecedents implied by the traditional reading (“He (Jibrīl) ʾistawā, while he (Jibrīl) was on the highest horizon. Then he (Jibrīl) drew near and hung suspended, until he (Jibrīl) was the measure of two bows or closer. Then he (God) revealed to his (God’s) servant (Muḥammad), by means of Jabrīl, that which he (God) revealed”). An important condition of ʾiltifāʿ or the unannounced change of person(al pronouns) (e.g. from 3rd to 1st person) or number (from singular to plural) is that the antecedent remain the same: “the pronoun in the person/thing one turns to should refer to the same person/thing from which one turned.” Thus sura 16:1f:

The command of Allāh comes; so seek not to hasten it. Glory be to Him! High be He exalted above that which they associate with Him. He sends down His angels with the Spirit on whomsoever He wills of His servants, Warn that there is no deity but I. So fear Me!

This sudden and unannounced shift from third person reference to God to first person speech of God still maintains a single antecedent, namely God. ʾIltifāʿ therefore may involve a shift in pronouns and a single antecedent, but not a single pronoun and a shift in antecedent, as posited by the traditional reading of surat al-Nājin. Van Ess’s analysis is thus likely correct: “His servant’ (of v. 10) can only be God’s servant there, namely

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526 Haleem, “Grammatical Shift,” 411.
Muhammad. But the 'he' who revealed...would have to be God Himself and God would also be the object of the vision.”

4.4. *Sūrat al-Najm* and the Throne-Theophany Tradition

The *mar'ā* of Muḥammad’s two visions recorded in *sūrat al-Najm* is undoubtedly God. Indeed, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrî (d. 728) understood the *ṣhadīd al-qawā‘* of v. 5 as a reference to God. Al-ʿQawwāl, he says, is from the ʿṢafāʿ Allāh. Al-Ṭabāṭabaʿī records the same opinion from some anonymous exegetes (he uses *qīla*). This exegesis finds support from 51:58, where God is called *Dhū ʿl-qawwā‘ ʿl-ma‘ān*, “Lord of Power, the Strong.” Muḥammad also is called *dhī qawwa* in *Sūrat al-Takwīr* (v. 20). The two appellations differ however in that *dhī qawwa* appropriately lacks the definite article found in *Dhū ʿl-qawwā‘ ʿl-ma‘ān*. In the Qurʾān, Muḥammad is given names of God minus the article. God is e.g. *al-Raʿīf* and *al-Raḥīm*, while Muḥammad is *raʿīf* and *raḥīm* (9:128).

According to v. 6 the *mar'ā* is *dhū mirra* which could mean either “possessor of firmness of shape” or “of intelligence.” Most exegetes seem to have read *dhū mirra* as *dhū qawwa*, possessor of strength, or as *dhū khalq hasan*, possessor of a beautiful body. Ibn ʿAbbās said “possessor of a beautiful appearance (dhū manzar hasan)” and Qatāda said a “large (tawīl) beautiful make.” Al-Ṭabarī accepted this corporeal interpretation, reading “sound of body (ṣūḥāṭ ʿl-jīm)”.

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527 “Vision and Ascension,” 50.


530 See below.


533 Al-Ṭabarī, Ṣāḥīh al-qayūn, 27:42ff.

534 Al-Ṭabarī, Ṣāḥīh al-qayūn, 27:43. He was no anthropomorphist however; al-Ṭabarī preferred the Jibrilian interpretation of this passage. Ṣāḥīh al-qayūn, 27:47.
The ḍhū mirra is said to have made istawā on the highest horizon (al-yuwaq al-ʿalā). The highest horizon is taken to mean “the eastern horizon from which comes dawn.”\textsuperscript{535} Al-Qurṭubī lists six possible readings for istawā.\textsuperscript{536} How one reads the verb depends on how one identifies the mustawin (the one who makes istawā); if it is Jibrīl istawā means istiqām, i.e. Jibrīl stood erect on the highest horizon. Ibn Ishāq (d. 767) is said to have contributed to this reading becoming orthodoxy\textsuperscript{537}; he records in his Sīrat rasūl Allāh that Muḥammad saw the angel in the form of a man “with feet astride the horizon.”\textsuperscript{538} The Muʿtazīlī al-Zamakhsharī preferred this interpretation.\textsuperscript{539} But as we saw above, a Jibrīlian reading of this early Meccan passage is not likely correct, as Jibrīl is not mentioned until the Medina period and angelic revelatory mediation is not emphasized in this early period. If the wa hūwa of v. 7 refers to Muḥammad,\textsuperscript{540} istawā then means ʾtīḍāl: Muḥammad is straight or balanced in his power (quvwā) or his mission (rīṣāla),\textsuperscript{541} or that the Prophet was established in a high place when he saw the being; this is the reading of the ʿAsharite Fākhīr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.\textsuperscript{542} If the mustawin is God, however, as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and others believed (see below), then istawā is to be read istawā ʿalā ʾl-ʿarsh, “(God) sat upright on the Throne.”\textsuperscript{543}

The mustawin marʿy is then said to “draw near and hang suspended thumma danā fasṭadallā,” coming so close to Muḥammad that the two were only distant “the measure of two bows or closer (vv. 8-9).” The traditional account has Jibrīl descending, a reading attributed to ʿĀṣīsha and ʿAbd Allah b. Masʿūd.\textsuperscript{544} But Ibn ʿAbbās and Anas b. Mālik both

\textsuperscript{535} Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 27:44; al-Baghdāwi, Tafsīr al-Baghdāwī, 4:245.

\textsuperscript{536} Al-Qurṭubī, al-Jāmiʿ li-ḥikam al-Qurʿān, 17:87ff. See also al-Qāsimī, Tafsīr al-Qāsimī, 6:360ff.

\textsuperscript{537} Van Ess, TG 4:387.

\textsuperscript{538} Ibn Ishāq, Sīrat rasūl Allāh, trans. A. Guillaume in The Life of Muḥammad (Lahore, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1967), 106.

\textsuperscript{539} Al-Zamakhsharī, al-Kashshāf, 5: 636.

\textsuperscript{540} Al-Baghdāwi reads it thus; Tafsīr al-Baghdāwī, 4:245. See also al-Qāsimī, Tafsīr al-Qāsimī, 6:362.

\textsuperscript{541} Al-Qurṭubī, al-Jāmiʿ li-ḥikam al-Qurʿān, 17:87.

\textsuperscript{542} Al-Rāzī, al-Tafsīr al-kabīr, 28:285.

\textsuperscript{543} Al-Qurṭubī, al-Jāmiʿ li-ḥikam al-Qurʿān, 17:88; al-Qāsimī, Tafsīr al-Qāsimī, 6:363.

said God drew close to Muḥammad and hung suspended.545 Anas b. Mālik’s narrative was actually canonized in al-Bukhārī.546 Muḥammad b. Ka‘b al-Qurrā related from “some of the Companions” that the Prophet cited thumma danā fa-tadallā as proof that he had seen God.547 Al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 723), who represented the exegetical tradition connected with Ibn ‘Abbās’ name in Eastern Iran, narrated on the latter’s authority the following report about the Prophet’s encounter with God:

[The Prophet said]: I looked at Him with my heart until I was sure that He was present and that I really saw Him. For suddenly He removed the curtain and there He was, sitting on His throne in all His dignity and glory...He bent over a little bit in His dignity towards me and bade me draw nearer. For this is the word of the Scripture where He reports how He treated me and glorified me (53:5-10) “He who is mighty in power, very strong. He held himself upright (v. 6)” - which, in this context, can only mean: on the throne, being on the higher horizon. “Then he drew near and hung suspended, two bows’-length away, or nearer...And he revealed to His servant that which He revealed,” namely the task He had decided to impose on me...He put one of His hands between my shoulder-blades, and for some time I felt the coolness of his fingers coming through my heart...548

This reading of vv. 6-10 as a throne theophany had illustrious support and wide currency at an early period in Islam.549 No less than the great al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) supported it.550 The wide currency of this interpretation is suggested by a late Umayyad polemic against Islam by the Manichean author Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. 756). The text of this

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545 Al-Tabari, Jāmī’ al-bayān, 27:45; al-Qurtubi, al-Jāmī’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān, 17:89; al-Lāikā’i, Sharḥ usūl ijtihād ašr l-sunnah wa l-jam’ah 2 vols. (Riyāḍ, 1985) 2:516: Abū Salama from Ibn ‘Abbās re: “He saw him descend again by the Lote-tree of the Boundary (52:13-14).” He said: “His Lord came near to him and hung suspended until he was the measure of two bows or closer, then He revealed to His servant what He revealed.”

546 Al-Bukhārī, Sahih (trans. Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khān; Beirut: Dār al-‘Arabia, 1985), Kitāb al-tawḥīd, 37. It is a Mi‘rāj narrative in which Ibn Mālik declared: “When the holy Prophet reached sidrat al-mutahā, God Most High drew near him and hung suspended above him till there remained between the Prophet and Him a distance equal to two bow-lengths or even less.” See further below.


549 On the “high degree of acceptance which the anthropomorphic interpretation of sūrat al-Nūmān found in the early community” see van Ess, Flowering of Muslim Theology, 59, 63; idem, “Vision and Ascension,” 55.

polemic itself is no longer extant, but fragments are preserved in a refutation of it by the Zaydī imam al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 860). Ibn al-Muqaffā', the “closet” zindīq of Persian origin who served as secretary to Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid governors, wrote the anti-Islamic polemic in which he accused the Muslims of pretending that “their Lord is sitting (qāʿid) on His throne” and that He “descends (tadallā) and draws near, two bows’-length away or nearer.” This is an obvious reference to sūrat al-Najm. Ibn al-Muqaffā' was certainly not speaking as a simple outsider. Being on intimate terms with the court privied him to at least a casual knowledge of the views of his patrons. His use of rabbahum (their Lord) suggests that Ibn al-Maqaffa' was speaking for the Muslims in general and therefore describing a popular notion. In reply, al-Qāsim confirms that such a picture was widespread, but argues for a metaphorical interpretation of “throne.” He suggests that sūrat al-Najm was understood as a throne-theophany by a large majority of the people, at least in the region where he wrote (probably Egypt). In any case, the theophanic interpretation of this passage appears to have enjoyed popular and/or official support during the period in which he wrote.

Now it is certainly bad methodology to draw any conclusions concerning Muslim religiosity solely from a hostile source such as Ibn al-Maqaffa’s polemic. However, the sources strongly indicate that Ibn al-Maqaffa' was truthful in his presentation of late Umayyad dogma, at least in regards to the popular interpretation of sūrat al-Najm as evidence of theophany and Visio Dei. This reading of v. 6 as suggesting a throne-theophany would put Muḥammad’s call securely within the biblical prophetic call


553 Guidi in La Lotta Tra l’Islam, Arabic text, 35.


tradition and would correspond to Walther Zimmerli’s ‘Type 2’ call account featuring the *vocandus* vision of God as a glorious anthropos enthroned in majesty. This motif and imagery would be developed in the ḥadīth literature.  

4.5. ‘His Heart Lied Not’

The description of the first vision ends with, “The heart did not lie (kaḍḥaba) concerning that which he/it saw (v.11).” Upon this verse hinged the debate over the manner in which Muḥammad saw his Lord, with his eyes or with his heart. In other words, was it a physical seeing or a dream-vision (ruʿyā), for seeing with the heart meant seeing in a dream-vision. Muslim relates in his Šaḥīḥ from Ibn ʿAbbās concerning this verse, “he saw Him with his heart twice.” Al-Qurṭūbī, who held that Muhammad saw God with his heart during his Miʿrāj, said this is the position of “Abū Dharr and a group of Companions.” They said that “God placed Muḥammad’s eyes in his heart and his heart saw Him, not his eyes.” Al-Bagḥawi on the other hand cites Anas b. Mālik, al-Ḥasan al-ʿAbsī and ‘Ikrima as a group who claimed Muḥammad saw God with his eyes. This is certainly the implication of v. 17, “The eyes turned not aside, nor exceeded the limit” (see below). This debate influenced how one read the verb kaḍḥaba of v. 11; when read with ṭakkṣīf(kaḍḥaba) Muḥammad’s heart does the seeing, i.e., “Muḥammad’s heart did not lie concerning that which it saw.” When read with ṭashdūd however (kaḍḍḥaba), we get “Muḥammad’s heart did not deny that which his eyes saw, rather it affirmed it (ṣaddāqahu wa ḥaqqaqahu).” Thus the famed qurʿānic exegete Muqtāl b. Sulaymān (d. 767) interpreted the verse: “ ‘his heart lied not about what he saw’ i.e. the

558 See below.

560 Muslim, Šaḥīḥ [English], 1:111.


564 Al-Bagḥawi, Ṭafṣīr al-Bagḥawi, 4: 236.
heart of Muḥammad did not lie about what his vision (baṣar) saw, the matter of his Lord on that night.\footnote{565} As al-Zamakhshārī explains:

The Prophet’s heart (and mind) in no way falsified that which he saw with his eyes... When the Prophet saw the angel with his eyes, his heart did not say ‘I don’t know who you are’; if it said so, it would have been a liar, because he knew him...\footnote{566}

According to Qâdi ‘Iyad this was the common reading of the verse:

The qur’ānic commentators say that His words ‘The heart did not lie about what it saw’ means that the heart did not imagine the eye to have been other than truthful. It confirmed what was seen. In other words his heart did not reject what his eye saw.\footnote{567}

In the light of v. 17 this seems reasonable (see below). It is also consistent with the qur’ānic position that the heart is the locus of comprehension.

We have cast veils (akinna) over their hearts so that they understand it not and a deafness in their ears. And if they see every sign (āya) they will not believe in it. So much so that when they come to thee they only want to dispute with thee. Q. 6:25

For surely it is not the eyes (al-abṣār) that are blind but blind are the hearts which are in their breasts. Q. 22:46

If the heart is darkened and the understanding of reality is off, seeing would be disbelieving, even the signs (āya) of God. Only a pure heart can properly perceive divine workings. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:6).” One must be of pure heart in order to see God. On this reading Q. 53:11 seems to be affirming the proper state of Muḥammad’s heart at the time of the encounter, which allowed him to perceive his visitant correctly. Contrarily, Muḥammad’s Meccan opponents, whose hearts were veiled, doubted the divine source of his revelations. Majnūn (one possessed by a jinn/insane) is what they called him, claiming that his visitant was nothing more than a


\footnote{566} al-Zamakhshārī, al-Khāshākhā, 4:420.

\footnote{567} Al-Shīfa, 101. See also Qārī al-Harawi, Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1992) 9:626.
shaytān. But Muhammad, we are told, knew better. “His heart lied not concerning what he saw.”

4.6. Sūrat al-Najm and the Mi‘rāj?

Verses 13-16 give intriguing details concerning the second vision: “And indeed he saw him descend again, at the Lote-tree of the Boundary. Near it is the Garden of Refuge. When that which covers covered the lote-tree.” This vision is taken by most exegetes to have occurred during Muḥammad’s Ascension to heaven (Mi‘rāj).

There are difficulties with this interpretation, however. First, this verse clearly describes, not the ascent of the rāʾ (seer), but the descent of the marʿāf (seen). Richard Bell notes that the verb nazala used in this verse “implies a descent – one would expect to earth.” Josef van Ess correctly observes that, had the second encounter occurred in heaven, it would have been something altogether different from the first encounter, which clearly took place on earth. But the ukhrah (“again”) suggests that the experiences were similar.

Dans la vision coranique il n’est nullement dit que Muḥammad monte quelque part; au contraire quelqu’un descend vers lui. Le récit de la seconde vision commence ainsi: «il l’a vu descendre une autre fois» (wa laqad raʾaḥu nazalātun ʿurrah). Muḥammad se trouve quelque part sur la terre; cela va sans dire pour la première vision où il voit quelqu’un «à l’horizon supérieur» (53/7) et si la seconde vision avait eu lieu au ciel, la différence éclatante avec la première aurait raisonnablement entraîné une autre introduction ou une insistance.

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568 Concerning the temporary cessation of revelation (ṣaḥāra) which reportedly caused Muḥammad much grief, Umm Junbul, wife of Abū Lahab, said: “O Muḥammad, I see your shaytān has left you!” This is reported in al-Zamākhshārī, Kashshāf, 766.


570 As Rahmán, Major Themes, 92 points out: “instead of the Prophet ‘going up’ in Ascension, in both cases the agent of Revelation ‘came down’.” See also Bell, “Muḥammad’s Visions,” 150; van Ess, “Le MiṣRĀG et la Vision de Dieu,” 32 and below.

571 Bell, Commentary on the Qurʾān, 2:316. See also Kees Wagendonk, Fasting in the Koran (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968) 111 n. 3: “Both visions of S. 53 take place = on earth.”

particulière sur cet apogée du récit («il l’a même vu au ciel quand il y fut élevé» ou quelque chose de ce genre au lieu de «il l’a vu descendre une autre fois»).\footnote{Van Ess, "Le MPRÅG et la Vision de Dieu," 32. "In the Qur‘anic vision it is not at all said that Muhammad ascended somewhere; on the contrary someone descended toward him. The narration of the second vision begins thus: ‘he saw him descend another time’ (wa laqad ra‘lahu nazlatun shirah). Muhammad is somewhere on earth; it goes without saying for the first vision where he sees someone ‘on the highest horizon’ (53/7) and if the second vision has taken place in the sky, the vivid difference with the first [vision] would have reasonably brought another introduction or a particular insistence at the beginning of the narrative (‘he even saw him in the sky when he was raised there’ or something similar instead of ‘he saw him descend another time’)."
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} Afterwards he ascended to heaven from the Rock of Jerusalem, leaving behind his footprint for all posterity to witness;\footnote{Bell, “Muhammad’s Visions,” 150; *EF* 9:549-550 s.v. Sidr by Remke Kruk.} The Resurrection and Judgment assembly will be there.\footnote{Mathews, *Palestine-Mohammedan Holy Land*, 30; Ofer Livne-Kafri, “Jerusalem in Early Islam: The Eschatological Aspect,” *Arabica* 53 (2006): 382-403; idem, “Fadā‘l Bayt al-Maqdis (The merits of Jerusalem): Two Additional Notes,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 19 (2001): 63-66.} Mecca too was considered a paradise.\footnote{The Resurrection and Judgment assembly will be there.} It was
in al-Ṭā‘īf, not Jerusalem, where God’s footprint remains from his ascent to heaven after creation.\footnote{Ibid.}

Secondly, the Ascension is extra-qur’anic; there is no mention of it in the text and only later was the miracle described.\footnote{See sources and discussion in M.J. Kister. “Some Reports Concerning Al-Ṭā‘īf,” in idem, Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980) XI:18 [art.=1-18]; van Ess, TG 4:396.} Indeed, the Qur‘ān seems to actually reject the very idea of an ascension of the prophet:

They say: ‘We will not believe thee till thou makest a spring to gush forth from the earth for us...or till thou goest up into heaven; and we will not believe thy going up till thou bringest down on us a book that we may read.’ Say (Muḥammad): ‘glory be to my Lord! Am I but a mortal, a messenger? (17:90-93)

As Archer observes, “The matter of any miraculous power of his is practically dismissed by him in \textit{sura} 17:92-97.”\footnote{EQ 1:176 s.v. Ascension by Michael Sells: “The Qur‘ānic grounding of the ascent (mi‘raj) is tenuous in two ways. In the first place, the ascent is not described and the term mi‘raj is not used in the Qur‘ān. Secondly, Qur‘ān stresses that Muhammad brings no miracle other than the divinely-wrought miracle of the Qur‘ān itself.” See also \textit{EF} 7:100 s.v. Mi‘raj; In Arabic Literature by J.E. Bencheikh.} Hämeen-Anttila likewise notes: “Qur‘ān 6:35 mentions ladders with which to ascend to Heaven, but the implication is that not even Muḥammad can ascend to Heaven. The idea of an ascent was familiar but rejected.”\footnote{Archer, \textit{Mystical Elements in Mohammed}, 49.} But the pressure from the Shi‘ī heroes who earlier claimed heavenly ascent and (mainly) Christian apologists who argued that Islam is no true religion because Muḥammad had no evidentiary miracles as indicated in the Qur‘ān itself inspired the development of the \textit{mi‘raj} legend.\footnote{Hämeen-Anttila, “Descent and Ascent,” 50. See also Angelika Neuwirth, “From the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Temple: Surat al-Isrā’ between Text and Commentary,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish and Joseph W. Goering (edd.), \textit{With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 396-98 [art.=376-407]. See also Wagendonk, \textit{Fasting in the Koran}, 109: “The idea of an ascending-to-heaven by Mohammed in order to receive the revelation occurs in the same verse (i.e. Q.17:93[95]) although there it is rejected.”} The weavers of this legend made considerable use of the sacral king...
mythology of the ANE as well as Jewish Apocalyptic literature. Geo Widengren concluded:

In spite of the clear statement of the Qurʾān there has grown up a whole literature describing the ascension of the Apostle of God and his receiving in the highest heaven from the hands of God himself the Qurʾān, taken from the treasures of Allah’s throne... We are entitled to say that the old pattern of the Ancient Near East has triumphed over historical truth.

It at least triumphed over Qurʾānic truth, or so it would appear. While the miʿrāj tradition is certainly non-Qurʾānic the Qurʾān does make a very obscure allusion to a miraculous, nocturnal journey of the Prophet: “Glory to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque (al-masjid al-haram) to the Furthest Mosque (al-masjid al-aqsa),


whose precincts We have blessed, that We might show him of Our signs (ṣūrah 17:1).” All the problems with this verse and the difficulty in identifying the two masjids will not concern us here. Suffice it to say that Muslim tradition, not without cause, has identified the first with the Sacred Mosque in Mecca and the latter with Jerusalem. This isrā’, as the night journey is called, would therefore be a horizontal journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, not a vertical ascension. In an insightful study Angelika Neuwirth has well argued that the vertical interpretation of Q. 17:1 is part of later “mythologizing exegesis” built upon the dissolution of the qur’ānic discourse into isolated elements from which side-plots and background images were constructed. Van Ess has made the case recently that the vertical interpretation of the isrā resulted from a protracted theological debate involving popular beliefs on the one hand and the increasing ‘scandalization’ of anthropomorphism on the other. When Muslim theology ‘discovered’ divine immutability the ascent of the prophet, even to see God, became more palatable than the descent of God to the prophet at the conclusion of a horizontal journey of the latter.

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589 The legend of the Ascension was later affixed to the story of the isrā’, being said to have commenced after the Prophet reached Jerusalem. But the two stories are demonstrably separate and presuppose two totally different periods in the Prophet’s career (Bevan, “Muhammad’s Ascension to Heaven,” 56).

590 Neuwirth, “From the Sacred Mosque,” 398-399. She cites as examples the reference to night (layl) in the verse (17:1) which provoked the image of the Prophet’s deep sleep in tradition; the identification of the starting point of the journey as the sacred sanctuary in Mecca meant that the Prophet was asleep within the sanctuary; and the destination sanctuary’s description as having been ‘blessed’ gave rise to the tradition of the personal presence of bearers of that blessing, the prophets, there to greet Muhammad.

While at *al-majid al-aqsā* Muḥammad is said to have been shown some of God’s *āyāt*, usually translated as “signs.” What were these *āyāt*? The reports are not unanimous, ranging from *Burāq*, the fabulous winged steed, half mule, half donkey who transported Muḥammad, to the prophets Abraham, Moses and Jesus who were there assembled on his arrival at Jerusalem, to the vessels of milk, wine and water presented to the Prophet.\(^5^{92}\) It is not impossible that all may fall under the designation *āyāt*. But Ibn Isḥāq seems to have dematerialized the *āyāt*, thinking instead in terms of God’s “mighty sovereignty and power by which He does what He wills to do,”\(^5^{93}\) presumably a reference to God’s ability to transport the Prophet to and from Jerusalem in a single night.

There is a tradition that the Prophet saw God in Jerusalem. According to Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (d. 813), Ibn ‘Abbās interpreted Q 17:1 as a vision of God with his eyes.\(^5^{94}\) Ibn ‘Abbās allegedly reported from the Prophet that he had seen God during his nocturnal journey sitting on a throne, “under the form of a young beardless man (*shābb amrad*)” possessing a “twinkling light (*nūr yatala‘a*).”\(^5^{95}\) It is likewise reported on the authority of both Anas b. Mālik and Mu‘ādh b. ‘Afrā’ that Muḥammad saw him during the *isrā‘* under the same form (*shābb*) wearing a crown of pearls.\(^5^{96}\) All we can say for sure however is that *some* people understood the nocturnal journey of Q 17:1 to have concluded with an encounter with God in Jerusalem, His Paradise on earth, and that this vision was considered among the *āyāt* of God mentioned there. This association of the *āyāt* with this image of God as a youth we shall return to shortly.

\(^5^{92}\) For narratives that go into great detail regarding the Prophet’s visionary experiences see Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, 4-9.

\(^5^{93}\) Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 182.


\(^5^{95}\) Ibn al-Jawzā‘, *Daf Shubah al-tashbih*, 151.

\(^5^{96}\) See below. For a discussion of Muhammad’s encounter in Jerusalem with this youthful deity see van Ess, “Abd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock,” 96f; idem, “Youthful God”, and below.
4.7. *Ru'ya bi 'l-başar* (Vision of the Eyes) or *Ru'ya bi 'l-qalb* (Vision of the Heart)?

Concerning this second vision by the Lote-Tree of the Boundary v. 17 declares: “His eyes (başar) did not turn away (mā zāgha) nor did they exceed the limit (mā tağhā).” Richard Bell argued: “The impression of the passage as a whole is that the visions were actually seen with the eye; v. 17 can mean nothing less.”\(^597\) Gerhard Böwering argued as well that the exegesis “closest to the Qur’ānic text” is that which has Muhammad seeing God with his eyes. Many Muslim commentators agreed. Qaḍī ‘Iyad for example argued: “The eyes did not swerve (53:16): the vision is clearly ascribed to the eyes.”\(^598\) A History-of-Religions elucidation of this verse supports the view that sūrat al-Naṣr recounts physical visions of God by Muhammad. Because seeing God’s glorious, luminous form was dangerous to mortal vision,\(^599\) when confronted by the divine presence humans turned the eyes away or hid their face. “Because humans cannot look gods in the face they must look away.”\(^600\) As it is said in Exod 3:6: “And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.”\(^601\) Enoch trembled as he entered the heavenly house and saw God.

\(^{597}\) Bell, “Muhammad’s Visions,” 151.

\(^{598}\) Al-Shīfa, 101.

\(^{599}\) That Muhammad saw a luminous form is supposed by some scholars. Yahiya Emerick, in narrating the traditional account of the Prophet’s call, noted: “Muhammad awoke and was startled to see a vision of light in the form of a man standing before him.” *The Life and Work of Muhammad* (Critical Lives; Indianapolis: Alpha, 2002) 57. Henry P. Smith, *The Bible and Islam: The Influence of the Old and New Testaments on the Religion of Muhammad* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1897) 175 also suggested that “he (Muhammad) sees a radiant form.” This has some support in the hadith reports. In a Call-fragment on the authority of ‘Aisha describing the initial circumstances of Muhammad’s call (see below) the beginning of revelation is said to have come to him in the form of truthful dreams (*al-nīyā al-ṣādiqqa*) likened to day-break, *falaq al-subh*, which Ibn ‘Abbās interpreted as “sunlight during the day and moonlight at night.” (See al-Bukhārī, *Sahih*, IV, 91 *tabār al-nīyā, bāb 1, # 1, 347:4) Ibn Sa’d, Kitāb al-Tabaqāt al-Kabīr, 225), relates two call-fragments, one on the authority of Hishām b. ‘Urwa, the other on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, according to which the prophet told Khādijah presumably after the initial encounter with the numinous, “O Khādijah, I see light and hear sounds and I fear I shall be a soothsayer.”

\(^{600}\) Odyssey, 16.179.

\(^{601}\) Weiner H. Schmidt, *Exodus* (Neukirchen, 1988) II/1, 159 noted: “Jedenfalls ist Moses Geste Ausdruck der Ehrfurcht vor Gott und zugleich Bewahrung des Menschen vor dem Anblick der verehrenden Majestät Gottes.”/ “In any case Moses’ gesture is the expression of the reverence for God and at the same time man’s protection from the vision of the consuming majesty of God.” The same motif is probably found in Exod. 24:11 and Isaiah 6:1. The restriction of the description of the vision of the God of Israel to the throne beneath his feet at Exod. 24:11 “suggests...that the humans lowered their eyes in humility (Patrick, *Rhetoric of Revelation*, 59) and Isaiah’s description of the hem (?) of the divine robe may indicate that “he had not dared to lift up his eyes” (von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:64).
Until then I was prostrate on my face covered and trembling. And the Lord called me with his own mouth and said to me: "Come near to me, Enoch, and to my holy word." And he lifted me up and brought me near to the gate, but I continued to look down with my face. [I En 14:24-25]602

As Daniel Merkur notes: "Enoch had seen God; but now, as he recovered from his physical collapse, he averted his gaze with his vision in order to avoid renewing the collapse."603 Likewise, when Telemachus saw the radiant Odysseus he "turn(ed) his eyes away for fear of looking on a god."604 When the mortal Anchises was confronted by the radiant beauty of the goddess Aphrodite he turned his gaze away in terror, hid his face under the covers and begged for mercy.605 In the Mahābhārata the Indic hero Bhīma was granted his request to see the glorious form of the monkey deity Hanumān: "With splenour like the sun, like a golden mountain, making space itself ablaze. Bhīma shut his eyes (3.149.7)."606 This is not only a self-preserving gesture; it is also the proper etiquette when confronted by the divine:

the face-to-face encounter implies a relationship of parity between partners who look one another in the eyes. Looking away, lowering one’s eyes to the ground, covering one’s head: mortals have no other way to acknowledge their unworthiness and avoid the risk of confronting the unequalled, unbearable splendor of the divine countenance."607

Sūrat al-Najm [53]:17 however declares that Allah’s Apostle did not turn his gaze away. This is cited as proof of Muḥammad’s superiority over all previous prophets.608

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603 Ibid.

604 Odyssey, 16.173-83.

605 Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 1.181-190. On this same motif in Indic tradition see Laine, Visions of God, 94.

606 Translation by Laine, Visions of God, 94.


4.8. Theophany and the āyāt (Signs) of God

If v. 10 is for Western scholars decisive in support of the theophanic interpretation of the passage, v. 18 ("He indeed saw of the greatest signs [āyāt] of his Lord") is for many Muslim scholars decisive against it. The signs of God are other than God," some declared. On the other hand in one of the reports of ‘Ā’ishah’s denial of such a vision (to be treated below) the Tābi’i Masrūq (d. 682) advances this verse (53:18) as proof that Muhammad did see his Lord. We recall that sura 17:1, which affirms that the Prophet was shown the āyāt Allāh during his nocturnal journey, was in certain quarters read as a reference to Muḥammad’s vision of God. It is my opinion that reading this passage against the biblical background will help us elucidate the significance of v. 18 for the discussion of whether or not sūrat al-Najm can be read as an account of theophany.

The visions here recorded in sūrat al-Najm are usually understood as the prophet’s inaugural visions i.e., the visions experienced during his prophetic calling. We discovered above that, according to many form-critics the biblical prophetic call Gattung or schema included a divine encounter between the deity and the vocandus as well as a sign of assurance (vōth) from the deity to overcome the objections advanced by the reluctant prophet-to-be. The vōth, according to C.H. Keller, is an Offenbarungszeichen Gottes, "a sign through which God makes Himself manifest." The aim of the sign," Cornelis den Hertog notes, "is to lead the addressee to the conclusion that the word spoken is reliable.

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612 Peters, Muhammad and the Origins of Islam, 149; Watt, Muhammad’s Mecca, 55; Tor Andræ, Mohammed, the Man and his Faith (New York: Harper, 1960) 46-7.

613 See above.

614 Das Wort Oth als “Offenbarungszeichen Gottes” (Ph.D diss., Basel, 1946) 100.
In such cases therefore a sign has the function of evidence.\(^{615}\) The addressee or *vocandus* is often suspicious of the source of the words he hears and the nature of the being encountered. Gideon needed a sign of assurance - the miraculous burning of the meal by the touch of the *mal'āk Yahweh* - in order to be sure that “it is You (Yahweh) who talks with me (Judges 6:17).” The sign therefore serves to “prove the identity of the ultimate commissioner: YHWH,”\(^{616}\) thus assuring the prophet as well as authenticating him to others.\(^{617}\)

The *'āth* is usually an extraordinary or miraculous event, occurrence, or action “by which a person recognizes, learns, remembers, or perceives the authority of something.”\(^{618}\) Prophetic signs were necessary to convince the people of the legitimacy and authenticity of the prophetic role and message of the one called.\(^{619}\) Because Moses feared that the elders of Israel “will not believe me, nor hearken to my voice; for they will say: Yahweh hath not appeared unto thee (Exod. 4:1)” he is given signs or authenticating miracles for the benefit of the incredulous leaders of Israel.\(^{620}\) But for his own benefit the theophany, either at the Burning Bush or at Sinai, is given as the *'āth* or sign to Moses that “I have sent you (3:12).”\(^{621}\)

This motif of the theophany itself constituting the confirming prophetic sign is an important one. The call-report is an announcing of credentials, orally or in writing, to the

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616 Ibid., 38.

617 *TDOT* 1:187 s.v. יָדָא by F.J. Helfmeyer; *TDNT* 7:210-219 s.v. ήμετέρον on Jewish Soil by F.J. Helfmeyer.

618 Ibid., 170. The *'āth* could also be a vision granted to the prophet-to-be by the deity. See Štefan Porůčan, “The Word *'āth* in Isaia 7, 14,” *CBQ* 22 (1960): 144-159.

619 Habel, “Form and Significance,” 319: “the signs which the prophets received were also public credentials of their commission.”


community at large in accordance with the tradition of their predecessors. The legitimacy of the true prophet and the authority of his message are established by his call.

In their call experiences, the emphasis of having been to the immediate presence of the Deity becomes necessary in order to authenticate the message delivered. Thus most of the prophets with call narratives are found describing how in one form or another they have interacted with the deity in the process of their commissioning (Jer 1:9; Is 6; Ez 2; cf Gen. 24:9 and 24:10).

The ʿālh or authenticating sign could therefore be a description of the encounter with the deity, such as Jeremiah’s description of seeing God’s hand touch his lips during his call experience (Jer. 1:9).

The Hebrew term ʿālh is cognate to the Aramaic ʿālhā and the Arabic ʿāya (pl. ʿāyā). The latter term denotes a sign, token, marvel, or mark by which a person or thing is known. Like the Hebrew ʿālh the Arabic ʿāya often has a confirming or authenticating function. And like the Hebrew prophets before him Muḥammad found himself constantly called upon to produce this most important credential.

(The disbelievers) say: “Why has no sign (ʿāya) been sent down to him from his Lord?” Say: “Allah surely is able to send down a sign, but most of them know not (6:37)”

Now therefore let him (Muḥammad) bring us a sign such as the (former) prophets were sent with (21:5).

During the early Meccan period this was a persistent demand by the disbelieving Meccans as Richard Paul Bode demonstrated in his Th.D. thesis on the subject:

622 Habel, “Form and Significance,” 317. See also von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 55. “The call commissioned the prophet: the act of writing down an account of it was aimed at those sections of the public in whose eyes he had to justify himself.”

623 Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel, 182.


625 Habel, “Form and Significance,” 369 and below.

626 TDOT 1:167 s.v. ʿālh by F.J. Helfmeyer.

627 See Lane, Arabic—English Lexicon 1:135 s.v. ʿāl; EQ 5:2-11 s.v. Signs by Binyamin Abrahamov.

628 EQ 5:2 s.v. Signs by Binyamin Abrahamov.
The multiplicity of passages referring to the request or demand for signs would indicate that it was not a one-time or even occasional incident in the ministry of Muhammad. Rather it seems obvious that the request for signs on the part of his opponents must have been a persistent one. His non-performance of signs brought forth scoffing and jesting on the part of his opponents. The passages clearly show that they rejected Muhammad's message, or at least claimed to do so, because he did not back up his message with miraculous signs.  

George Hourani Muhammad's pointed out as well:

Prophets who claimed a special relation with God were expected to give proof of the authenticity of this relation...So what miracle could Muhammad perform as a sign (ṣigna) of his authentic divine inspiration? Such a sign was urgently needed by him because from an early date of his mission he was accused by his opponents in Mecca of being an imposter and a liar.

What miracle could the Meccan prophet offer? Richard Bell observed:

It was natural that the Meccans should ask for a sign, and at a certain stage Muhammad is much occupied with the problem of what signs he can offer...the most he alleges of a miraculous kind is the having seen one or two visions.

Indeed the anxiety over Muhammad's "critical need to authenticate his ministry" is clearly felt in the words of sūrat al-Najm. He is citing the two visions, which were apparently already a matter of dispute in the community (v. 12: "Do you then dispute with him concerning what he saw [lit. "sees"]?"). as "his supreme justification for


633 Bell, "Muhammad's Visions," 146: "Muhammad's object in recounting these visions evidently is to combat objections, or at least, excuses for indifference, to his work. He is not speaking because he wishes to speak, but he has been impelled to do so; and he is not in error, because it is impossible to doubt the source of the impulse which impels him. He has actually seen the heavenly personality from whom the impulse came on two different occasions."

634 On the possibility of reading 53:19 ("Have you seen, a-fa-ra'ya-humū, Al-Lat and Al-'Uzza, and Manat the third, the other?") as part of the Vision-controversy alluded to in vv. 1-18 see Jaako Hämäen-Anttila, "Qur. 53:19, the prophetic experience and the 'Satanic verses' – a reconsideration," ActOr 58 (1997): 24-34.
thinking that he was ‘the messenger of God’. Like the Hebrew prophets before him Muhammad claimed a visionary encounter with God as the authenticating sign of his ministry. “What seems to be certain is that Muhammad defended the truthfulness of his revelation by claiming as its proof his visionary experience of a divine being on the horizon.” God, presumably the voice heard in this passage, therefore affirms in v. 18 that the theophany experienced by the Arabian prophet was indeed the greatest of the āyāt or authenticating miracles: he saw God in his glory and his eyes did not swerve.

4.8.1. The Greatest of God’s Āyāt: His Theophanic Form?

The term āya, according to Lane, can have the following meanings (among many others): (1) a sign, token, or mark by which a thing is known; (2) “any apparent thing inseparable from a thing not equally apparent, so that when one perceives the former, he knows that he perceives the other, which he cannot perceive by itself, when the two things are of one predicament;” (3) a sign as an indication, evidence or proof; (4) a miracle, wonder, or prodigy (āyāt Allāh as “the wonders of Allah”); (5) the body (jism) or corporeal form of a figure or substance or of a man “which one sees from a distance.” A person or individual. It is here a synonym of shakhṣ, individual/person/figure.

These are illuminating definitions of āyāt and quite possibly offer us further insight into the thinking of those who read Q.53:18 as proof of Visio Dei. Definitions (2) and (5) may suggest a particular corporeal, theophanic form used by an otherwise unperceivable deity in order to be perceived. Such a motif, the duality of the unperceivable God and his visible (and sometimes hypostatic) form, is of course an ancient commonplace. This paradox was embraced by biblical and biblically affiliated traditions as well.


636 Park, “Muhammad’s Call Revisited,” 72.

637 Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 1: 135.

638 Ibid.


640 Terrien, Elusive Presence, 119: “The God of biblical faith, even in the midst of a theophany, is at once Deus revelatus atque absconditus.”
The Divine Presence imperils man... God, who reveals His 'unbearable' Presence to the helpless creature, also sustains man in the act of revelation... All protection, however, that shields the prophet hides God from him. God can only reveal Himself to man by hiding Himself in the very act of revelation.\textsuperscript{641}

As Jean-Pierre Vernant points out, “The paradox of the divine body is that in order to appear to mortals, it must cease to be itself”.\textsuperscript{642} It must clothe itself in veils or mortal disguises.

the apparition, rather than revealing the being of a god, hides it behind the multiple disguises of a 'seeming to be' that is adapted to feeble human vision. If a god's body can take on so many different forms, it is because not one of them can encompass within itself the Power that surpasses each of them and would impoverish itself if it were to be identified with any one of the figures that lends it its appearance.\textsuperscript{643}

Jewish mystics accepted this “paradox of the visibility of the essentially invisible deity” on the basis of the principle of coincidentia oppositorum or the “coinciding of opposites.”\textsuperscript{644} By positing a special theophanic form for God, the singularity of deus absconditus and deus revelatus is affirmed; the two are seen as but two manifestations of a single ontic reality.\textsuperscript{645}

Gevūrāh (lit. "Power"), according to Michael Fishbane, represents the essence of God in rabbinic literature.\textsuperscript{646} It is made manifest to mortals through his demeš (lit. "Likness") or special corporeal theophanic form.\textsuperscript{647} Islam inherited some of these notions from Jews

\textsuperscript{641} Berkovits, God, Man and History, 32, 33, 34.

\textsuperscript{642} Vernant, “Dim Body,” 37

\textsuperscript{643} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{644} On God according to this principle see Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, 419ff.


\textsuperscript{646} Ibid.

and Christians in Arabia. The mystical notions of lāḥūt (divinity) and nāsūt (humanity), borrowed from Arabic speaking Christians, resemble the Jewish notion of gevūrah and demūt.648 Similarly, for Muslim mystics such as al-Ḥallāj, lāḥūt represents God’s sublime divinity and nāsūt his corporeal, theophanic form: “Glory be to Him,” says al-Ḥallāj, “whose nāsūt manifested the secret of His dazzling lāḥūt’s sublimity, in the form of a man who eats and drinks.”649

This clearly demonstrates that such notions existed in Islam. The duality is present already in the Qur’ān: God is both al-Bāṭin (the Inner, the Hidden) and al-Zāhir (the Outward/Exterior, the Manifest) (57:3). This resembles the Jewish Gnostic adage that “God is both non-apparent and most apparent”650 and suggests that the duality of the Hidden and Manifest God – similar to what Henry Corbin called the paradox de monothéisme651 - so important in the ANE, Classical, biblical, and Jewish mystical traditions,652 was not neglected by Muḥammad even if it suffered some modifications later.

Can this help us in understanding sūrat al-Nājin? It may at least help us understand those who understood sūrat al-Nājin as a record of theophany. The ʿāya seen by Muhammad according to v. 18 might well have been understood as a special theophanic form in which God was encountered by his servant, a “morphic veil (ḥijāb al-ṣūrā)” as suggested by the Hanafi imām Ibn Humām (d. 1457).653 ʿĀya, like the Hebrew demūt and Latin formae (at least as used by the Church Fathers)654 might have carried the meaning of


649 From his Diwān, see EF 5:614 s.v. Lāḥūt and Nāsūt.

650 See Stroumsa, “Form(s) of God,” 274.

651 Le paradox de monothéisme (Paris: l’Herne, 1981). The paradox is that the invisible divine essence can only be known through the mediation of theophanies, but these cannot be considered as representative because that which is represented in transcendent. I say ‘similar’ because in these traditions God is concealed behind a theophanic ‘mask’ not because he is invisible but because he is dangerously luminous.


654 Stroumsa, “Form(s) of God,” 273.
“the body (jism) or corporeal form of a figure or substance” of a man/God which “one (Muḥammad) sees from a distance,” i.e. on the distant horizon. It was certainly later understood as a reference to a special angelophanic form. Commentators have read “he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord (v. 18)” as Muḥammad saw the angel Jibrīl in his non-human, winged form in which he was created and which the Prophet only saw on those two occasions mentioned in the passage. Every other occasion Muhammad saw only Jibrīl’s earthly form. Others thought the reference was to a green screen/cushion (rafī[a]) from Paradise obscuring the horizon. Some say Muḥammad saw Jibrīl in a green garment (hulla) made of rafī[a]. Al-Suyūṭī for example quotes the following tafsīr from Ibn Masʿūd:

The Messenger of God (ṣ) did not see Jibrīl in his [true] form except twice. As for the first time he asked [Jibrīl] if he could see him in his form, then he saw his form obstructing the horizon. As for the second time it was [while] Jibrīl was with him while on high (haythu sūd, i.e. during the Ascension?). That is [the meaning of] His statements “He was on the highest horizon (53:7)” [and] “He indeed saw of the greatest signs of his Lord (53:18).” [Ibn Masʿūd] said: the form (khalq) of Jibrīl.

But the passage in all likely-hood should be read theophanically for the reasons we have adduced above. If lexically the greatest of the āyāt of God could be a reference to a special angelophanic form then it is not far fetched to suggest that it also was understood as a reference to a special theophanic form by those who read the passage as a record of theophany. The dhū mirra of v. 6 might then be read with Ibn ’Abbās, Qatada, and al-Ṭabarī as “possessor of a beautiful make (dhū khalq hasan)” which may be a reference to that “most beautiful form” of God reportedly seen by the Prophet. Muhammad would have seen this beautiful body first at a distance, on the highest horizon (v. 7). One of

655 Al-Baghawī, Tafsīr al-Baghawī, 4:249.

656 Al-Suyūṭī, Tafsīr al-Durr al-manṭūr, 7: 651; see also al-Ṭabarī, Jāmī al-bayān, 27:57.


659 See below.
Lane’s definitions for āya is thus: “the body, or corporeal form or figure or substance, of a man, which one sees at a distance.”

4.9. *Sūrat al-Takwīr* vs. *Sūrat al-Najm*

*Sūrat al-Najm* is no doubt an account of a theophany, two theophanies actually. Muhammad claims to have seen God first on a distant horizon, then again at some as yet undetermined location on earth, in Mecca or maybe in Jerusalem. The first vision on the horizon is alluded to also in *sūrat al-Takwīr* [81]: 15-24.

15. Nay! I swear by the retreating stars,
16. Running their course and setting
17. And the night when it departs
18. And the morning when itbrightens,
19. (That) surely it is the word of a noble messenger, innahul laqawil rasūl karīm
20. Possessor of strength, established with the Lord of the Throne
21. One to be obeyed there, faithful.
22. And your companion is not mad.
23. He truly saw him on the clear horizon (al-uffaq al-mubīn)
24. And he is not ganīn/dānīn regarding al-Ghayb.

If Muslim and Western scholars disagree over the interpretation of *sūrat al-Najm* – the latter generally reading it as a theophany the former as an angelophany – there is some agreement on the interpretation of this passage. The “noble messenger” is generally understood to be the angel Jibrīl who was seen by Muhammad on the clear horizon (v. 23). Even when Western scholars assume that the object of the ‘horizon’ vision was God in *sūrat al-Najm*, some also assume that by the time of the revelation of *sūrat al-Takwīr* – maybe Medina, but certainly later than *sūrat al-Najm*, we are told – Muhammad

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changed his view, now believing that he had been wrong all along in his thinking that God could appear to him, a change in perspective inspired by contact with Jews and Christians in Medina and reflected in sūrat al-Takwīr. Muhammad, at least for a time, believed he had seen the supreme deity, and presumably still believed this when Sūra 53 was revealed. Later, especially when he learnt that Jews and Christians held that God cannot be seen, he came to think that the vision had been not of God but of an angel.

This certainty that Muhammad changed his view is based on two assumptions: (1) sūrat al-Takwīr is later than sūrat al-Najm and (2) the “noble messenger” mentioned in v. 19 is the object of Muhammad’s vision. Neither of these assumptions is likely correct. Muslim scholars treat sūrat al-Takwīr as an early Meccan revelation, indeed one of the earliest. Ibn Kathīr assumed the chronological priority of this revelation over sūrat al-Najm, another early Meccan text, due to the fact that only one of the two visions is mentioned here. This suggested to him that only one vision had occurred at the time of the revelation of these verses. Western scholars generally agree in dating sūrat al-Takwīr earlier than sūrat al-Najm. On the other hand, a number of scholars recently tend to think of sūrat al-Takwīr as later. Because the rasūl karīm of v. 19 is taken to be the marīy here and therefore identified with the angel Jibril, these scholars suggest that the passage must be Medinan. Jibril, we recall, is only introduced in Medina passages. Van Ess argued for example:

662 Bell, “Muhammad’s Vision’s,” 149-50; Paret, Mohammad, 44-45; Watt, Muhammad’s Mecca, 56-7; Peters, Muhammad and the Origins, 149; van Ess, Flowering, 51-53.
663 Van Ess, The Flowering of Muslim Theology, 51-53;
664 Watt, Muhammad’s Mecca, 56-7
665 See Maudūdī, The Meaning of the Qur’ān, 15:293f.
668 See above n. 662.
The fundamental conditions had changed. The verses in surat al-Takwīr were certainly later than those of surat al-Najm, for now the vision is no longer described in detail, but simply mentioned as something already known. The public addressed in surat al-Takwīr may have lived in Medina, where the Jewish community listened to the Prophet’s revelation with a critical ear.\textsuperscript{669}

Van Ess’s argument for the late date of surat al-Takwīr is incoherent. Because the description of one of the two visions is less detailed than that found in surat al-Najm van Ess assumes, not without warrant, that the reference is to ‘something already known’ by Muhammad’s audience. But surat al-Najm gives an even stronger impression of the audience’s knowledge of the context of Muḥammad’s references. “Do you (listeners) then dispute with him concerning what he saw? (v.12)”\textsuperscript{670} The claim “He indeed saw him” needed not be any more precise because his listeners clearly knew whom Muḥammad claimed to have seen and some had already disputed this claim. Van Ess acknowledges this circumstance. The reference in surat al-Najm to the visions were originally “an allusion made by the Prophet to something previously known, as a proof of his veracity in a delicate moment.”\textsuperscript{670} Since both passages are admittedly allusions to ‘something previously known,’ this circumstance cannot be used to assign priority to either. Ibn Kathīr’s attention to the fact that in surat al-Takwīr only one of the visions is mentioned suggesting thereby that only one encounter had occurred is much more persuasive. While it is not terribly difficult to imagine circumstances in which the invoking of only one of two known events is necessary or desirable in order to make a point, some attention must be given to the fact of the singularity of the reference, particularly since this single reference is to the first of the two encounters. Considering also that the language of surat al-Takwīr is distinctly Meccan,\textsuperscript{671} there is no internal evidence to impeach the Muslim/Western agreement on the historical priority of surat al-Takwīr to surat al-Najm.

It boils down to the question who is the rasūl karīm? Hyondo Park points out:

\textsuperscript{669} Van Ess, Flowering of Muslim Theology, 51-53.

\textsuperscript{670} Ibid., 71; idem, “Vision and Ascension,” 58.

\textsuperscript{671} For example Muḥammad’s vindication in 81:22 from the charge of being mājnūn, “jinn-possessed” or insane. This terminology is distinctly early Meccan, replaced in late Meccan and Medinan passages with bīḥ jinnāt. See EJ 5:1101-1102 s.v. Māijnūn by A.T. Welch. Also, the maw'ūdā of vv. 8-9 supports a Meccan locale.
The object of Muhammad's vision in 81:19 is obscure and hard to determine. It depends on whom 'the noble messenger (rasūl karīm)' in 81:19 refers to and whether or not it is the object of the vision in 81:23. What is certain is that the expression 'noble messenger' is consistently used in the Qur'an for a prophet. In light of this evidence, the noble messenger in 81:19 must refer to Muhammad; therefore, it cannot be the object of the vision in 81:23, which means the "hu" of "ra'ūhu" there must remain unidentified. Textual evidence in 53:1-12 shows that the object of Muhammad's vision is God...

In 44:17 Moses is described as rasūl karīm, and in sūrat al-Hādīqa [69:38-43], false charges issued against Muhammad by the disbelievers are refuted in a manner remarkably similar to our passage from sūrat al-Tâkîrā.

38. But nay! I swear by that which you see
39. And that which you see not
40. Surely, it is the word of a noble messenger, innahu laqawal rasūl karīm
41. And it is not the word of a poet. Little it is that you believe
42. Nor the word of a soothsayer. Little it is that you mind.
43. It is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.

Muhammad is described in v. 40 with the same words of 81:19, innahu laqawal rasūl karīm.

Welch thus concludes:

Note that 69.40 is verbatim duplication of 81.19. In 69.40 it is clear that the expression rasūl karīm...refers to Muhammad...the consistent use of rasūl karīm as an expression for a prophet in other parts of the Koran...supports the view that it referred at least originally to a prophet, Muhammad.

We therefore have no reason to doubt that the two verses, 69:40 and 81:19 refer to the same subject: Muhammad. The noble messenger of sūrat al-Tâkîrā is to be obeyed, muja'īn (v. 21), and in sūrat al-Nīṣā (4:64) God declares "We sent no messenger except he should be obeyed by Allah's command." The noble messenger is faithful, amīn, and one of Muhammad's alqāb is al-Amīn. Al-Qurṭubī records this very interpretation from some

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672 Moses 44:17 (16), Muhammad 69:40.
673 Park, “Muhammad's Call Revisited,” 73.
675 On Muhammad’s ‘profoundly ingénue' restructuring of the socially, culturally, and politically vital principal of sunna so as to found upon it the radically new obligation of obedience to God’s messengers, in contrast to his mantic rivals the poets and kuhfīn “whom no one seems to have followed and who seems not to have expected to be obeyed” see Michael Zweitler, “A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of ‘The Poets’ and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in James L. Kugel (ed.), Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) 116-119 [art. = 75-119].
anonymous exeges (he uses qīla and man qāla).\footnote{Al-Qurṭubī, \textit{al-Jāmi` li-akhlāq al-Qur`ān}, 19: 238.} According to these, vv. 19 and 22 are responses to the mushrikūn who alleged that the Prophet was majnūn/mad or possessed by a jinn. He is therefore vindicated as a noble messenger who is quite sane, and who truly saw what he claims he saw. \textit{Dhū qarnayn} (v. 20) and \textit{muhāfiz} (v. 21) are interpreted by these anonymous exeges as attributes of the Prophet: possessor of strength regarding conveyance of the message, \textit{tablīq al-risāla}, and those who obey Allah must obey him.\footnote{Ibid.}

If the “noble messenger” of v. 19 is Muhammad, as seems likely, we are forced to reconsider the traditional interpretation of v. 23, “And he truly saw him on the clear horizon.” While it is indeed still possible to interpret the \textit{mar`ī} here as Jibrīl, it is no longer necessary to do so. If the passage is Meccan, however, which seems likely, it can’t be Jibrīl. On the contrary, there are hints in the passage that suggest a theocentric interpretation. The next verse reads: “Nor is he \textit{zanūn}/\textit{danīn} regarding \textit{al-Ghayb} (v. 24)” The readers (\textit{qurā`ī}) apparently disagreed over the reading (\textit{qirā`a}) of this verse. The Medinese \textit{qurā`} read \textit{danīn} with a \textit{ḏād}, meaning stingy/niggardly. Many Meccans, Kufans and Baṣrians read \textit{zanūn} with a \textit{ḏā}.

\footnote{Al-Ṭabarī, \textit{Jāmi` al-bayān} 30:31.} Ibn Kathīr preferred \textit{zanūn} quoting Suwayr b. ‘Uyayna’s definition as “one who is suspected of dishonesty (\textit{al-muthāham}).”\footnote{Ibn Kathīr, \textit{Tafsīr al-Qur`ān}, 14:271. For this translation of \textit{al-muthim} See \textit{Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr} (Abridged) 10:385.} The polytheists either accused Muhammad of lying or of concealing portions of revelation. As it is difficult to imagine those disbelievers in the revelation accusing the Prophet of being stingy in its regard, the former reading seems more consistent with the context. What is the Prophet supposed to have lied about or followed false conjecture concerning? Clearly this verse is to be read in the context of the previous verse, “he indeed saw him on the clear horizon.” Verse 24 absolves Muhammad of \textit{zanūn} regarding \textit{al-Ghayb}. The classical interpretation of \textit{al-Ghayb} here is “the Qur`ān”- so Qatāda said, “The Qur`ān was unseen
and Allah revealed it to Muḥammad.” But this makes no sense in light of v. 23. Did the Prophet see the Qurʾān on the clear horizon? Certainly not.

While al-Ghayb has the popular meaning of unseen or unknowable, “hidden things,” in religious literature it often refers to the absolute mystery of God Himself. Did Muhammad see God on the clear horizon? This is certainly one way of reading the passage. It is therefore no surprise that certain early mufṣīnān interpreted 81:23 as a vision of God by Muhammad. Al-Qurṭubī, again using the anonymous qīla, cites as an interpretation of this verse: “Muḥammad saw his Lord on the clear horizon.” According to one version of the ḥadīth of `Ā'isha’s famed rejection of Muḥammad having seen God, Masrūq advanced as proof that Muḥammad did see his Lord this very verse 81:23.

4.10. Concluding Remarks

Pace Saeed, the evidence strongly suggests that sûrat al-Najm [53]: 1-18 reports an instance of Muhammad having seen God with his eyes. The text seems to indicate that Muḥammad invoked these visions as his authenticating prophetic sign in response to the demand for such by his Meccan detractors. Hämeen-Anttila’s claim that “as there is almost no biblical influence in this surah, we have to think of the descending numen in more pagan terms” is to be rejected. The passage evidently presents experiences of the Prophet that are consistent with and understandable against the backdrop of the biblical prophetic call/theophany tradition. There is no evidence that Muḥammad changed his

681 *EF* 2:1025 s.v. al-Ghayb by D.B. MacDonald; see also Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 2:2312f s.v. غَيْبَة.
683 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān, 7:452.
685 “Descent and Ascent,” 51.
view regarding whom he saw on/against the horizon. His claim in surat al-Najm of having seen God is not contradicted in surat al-Takwir, as assumed by van Ess and others.

The Qur'an therefore reports the theophanic experiences of two prophets: Moses and Muhammad. Even though Moses was apparently a bystander at the theophany directed toward the mountain (Q 7:143), he suffered the theophanic after-effects for being in the visual vicinity. Having likely seen God as he manifested his jālāl or majesty to the mountain, Moses fell dumbstruck, as is common in theophanic encounters. Muhammad, on the other hand, saw God and like the elders of Israel on Mountain Sinai (Exod. 24:9-11) suffered no harm for having done so: “On (Muhammad) He laid not His hand.” Unlike the elders of Israel, however, who seem to have averted their gaze during the theophany, Muhammad’s eyes swerved not. This circumstance may be the qur'ānic inspiration for the later granting to Muhammad superiority over Moses on account of his (Muhammad’s) vision of God.687

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687 See below.
Chapter V:

Muḥammad’s Prophetic Call: From Theophany to Angelophany

5.1. The Angel Jibrīl and the Canonical Call-Account

One version of the canonical account of Muḥammad’s call to prophecy is provided by Ibn Išāq (d. 767) in his Sīrat Rasūl Allāh, the earliest extant biography of the Prophet.

The apostle would pray in seclusion on Hira’ every year for a month to practice tahrīm as was the custom of Quraysh in heathen days. Tahrīm is religious devotion... When it was the night on which God honoured him with his mission and showed mercy on His servants thereby, Gabriel brought him the command of God. ‘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 (iqrā’)!”’ I said, “What shall I read?” He pressed me with it 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 again so 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 a third time so that I thought it was death and said, “Read!” I said, “What then shall I read?” and this 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 (Q 96:1-5).” So I read it, and he departed from me. And I awoke from my sleep, and it was as though these words were written on my heart. When I was midway on the mountain, I heard a voice from heaven saying, “O Muhammad! thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel.” I raised my head towards heaven to see (who was speaking), and lo, Gabriel in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon, saying, “O Muhammad! thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel.” 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 Khadija sent her messengers in search of me and they gained the high ground above Mecca and returned to her while I was standing in the same place; then he parted from me and I from him, returning to my family. And I came to Khadija and sat by her thigh and drew close to her. She said: “O Abūl-Qāsim, where hast thou been? By God I sent my messengers in search of thee, and they reached the high ground above Mecca and returned to me.” I told her of what I had seen; and she said: “Rejoice, O son of my uncle, and be of good heart. Verily, by Him in whose hand is Khadija’s soul, I have hope that thou wilt be the prophet of this people.” Then she rose and gathered her garments about her and set forth to her cousin Waraqa b. Nawfal

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b. Asad b. ‘Abdul’-Uzza b. Quṣay, who had become a Christian and read the scriptures and learned from those that follow the Torah and the Gospel. And when she related to him what the apostle of God told her he had seen and heard, Waraqa cried, ‘Holy! Holy! Verily by Him in whose hand is Waraqa’s soul, if thou hast spoken the truth, O Khadija, there has come unto him the greatest Nāmūs who came to Moses aforesight, and lo, he is the prophet of this people. Bid him be of good heart.’ So Khadija returned to the apostle of God and told him what Waraqa had said. And when the Apostle of God had finished his period of seclusion and returned (to Mecca), in the first place he performed the circumambulation of the Ka’ba, as was his wont. While doing it, Waraqa met him and said, ‘O son of my brother, tell me what thou hast seen and heard.’ The apostle told him, and Waraqa said, ‘Surely, by Him in whose hand is Waraqa’s soul, thou art the prophet of this people. Thou will be called a liar, and they will also use thee despitefully and cast thee out and fight against thee. Verily, if I live to see that day, I will help God in such wise as He knoweth.’ Then he brought his head near to him and kissed his forehead; and the apostle went to his own house.689

Versions of this account appear in al-Bukhāri (d. 870) and al-Tabarī (d. 923).690

While there are in these three sources significant differences in detail across the accounts,691 the basic story is the same: while in seclusion in the cave of Hira’ Muhammad suddenly encounters (in his sleep) the angel Jibril who eventually reveals to him the first five verses of sūrat al-‘Alaq. When the prophet awakens and begins his descent down the mountain he again encounters the angel, this time while awake. He sees him against the horizon in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon, a clear allusion to the vision recounted in sūrat al-Naṣr [53]:7.692 But in the Qur’ān the one seen against the horizon was likely God, not Jibril.693

As demonstrated by several scholars much of Muhammad’s biography is pious legend, not scientific history.694 Like the Ascension narrative, the canonical account of


690 See below nn. 707 and 708.


692 Peters, Muhammad and the Origins of Islam, 149.

693 EQ 5:261 s.v. Theology and the Qur’ān by T. Nagel: “In Q 53, the Qur’ān speaks frankly about Muhammad’s encounter with the one God, repudiating the reproaches of Muhammad’s fellow Meccan citizen’s who consider him a fool for what he relates.” See also above.

694 EQ 5:29-51 s.v. Sira and the Qur’ān by Wim Raven: “The sīra as a whole is a vehicle of salvation history rather than scientific history”; Welch, “Muhammad’s Understanding of Himself,” 52; “there is very little Koranic foundation for certain Islamic beliefs such as the sinlessness of Muhammad, his superiority over other prophets, and his proclivity and even ability to perform miracles...The Koran presents Muhammad as a great man, but also as a very human one. In the generations after his death historical fact gave way to
Muhammad’s call to prophecy is a tendentious product of a later age. The problem solved by this legend was anthropomorphism. As F.E. Peters remarks: “This tradition...is exegetical, assuring the Muslim that the unidentified presence in Sura 53: 5-10, which is obviously the inspiration for this story, was not God, as we have reason to suspect, but Gabriel...” Jibril here thus plays the role of “theological safeguard,” as Daniel A. Madigan put it: “If the Prophet has dealings only with Gabriel and not with God directly, the absolute transcendence and immateriality of God is safeguarded.” But Jibril, as we discovered above, was not recognized in the early revelations and some traditions even introduce him late in the Prophet’s career.

The Ascension narrative is composite, composed of “preconstituted ensembles endowed with a certain autonomy of one in relation to the others.” That is to say, it


695 Bell, “Mohammed’s Call,” 16: “The whole story is the invention of a later age”; Watt, Muhammad’s Mecca, 55: “To the modern scholar it is virtually certain that what happened was different from what is asserted here. For one thing it is only after the Hijra that Gabriel appears in the Qur’an as the bearer of revelation [2.97]”; Rahman, Major Themes, 96-7: “Those Hadith stories, then, where the angel Gabriel is depicted as a public figure conversing with the Prophet...must be regarded as later fictions.”

696 Peters, Muhammad and the Origins of Islam, 149. See also As van Ess Flowering of Muslim Theology, 55: “Those who were put off by anthropomorphism would soon come to believe that the Prophet had seen Gabriel”; Park, “Muhammad’s Call Revisited,” 74: “The traditional claim that Muhammad saw Gabriel, or an angel on the horizon seems to have been derived from later exegetical efforts to avoid interpreting the object of the vision in the Qur’anic verse as God.”

697 EQ 4:445 s.v. Revelation by Daniel A. Madigan.

698 See above.

was progressively fabricated from independent narrames (bits of narrative) drawn from diverse contexts: from the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, the “stories of the prophets,” cosmogonic and eschatological texts. Ibn Hishām admits to producing the Ascension narrative of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīra by combining ḥadīth reports of various companions. Likewise, the canonical Call-narrative is recognized as being a ‘Konglomerat,’ “That the (call) account had been welded together from several traditions which had been used differently by the various revisers and by means of content-correction were conformed to one another is indeed obvious at first glance,” argued Tor Andrae. The independent narremes brought together in the canonical account of Muḥammad’s call to prophecy are:

1.] The Pre-prophetic ‘truthful dreams’ (al-ru‘yâ ʿal-ṣādiqa) narreme [i.e., before Muḥammad’s actual call-encounter he experienced “truthful dreams” that came to him like the brightness of daylight].

2.] The tahannuth-narreme [i.e. the account of Muḥammad’s performance of certain undefined religious devotions prior to his call].

3.] The iqra‘-legend [i.e. the legend of the nocturnal appearance of the angel to Muḥammad in the cave of Hira’, who forced him to recite/read (the emphatic iqra‘—Read!) sura 96:1-5 in spite of Muḥammad’s refusal three times].

4.] The uyfaq-legend [i.e. the legend of Muḥammad’s diurnal encounter with a heavenly being whom he saw against the horizon].

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700 Ibn Ishāq’s mīrāj narrative is a “weaving together of a number of traditions stemming from various intimates of Muḥammad.” Porter, “Muḥammad’s Journey to Heaven,” 1. On the composite nature of the Ascension narratives see further Colby, “Constructing an Islamic Ascension Narrative.”

701 Ibn Hishām remarks that he takes the accounts of eight Companions, “combined [them] in this ḥadīth report, each telling a part of the matter of when [Muḥammad] was caused to journey by night.” Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh: Das Leben Muḥammed’s nach Muḥammed Ibn Ishāq bearbeitet von Abd el-Malik Ibn Hischām, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, vol. 1/1 (Göttingen, 1856), 263.


703 E.g. al-Bukhārī, Sahīh, 1:2, kiṭāb al-ru‘ayha # 3. “The beginning of revelations to the Apostle of Allah, may Allah be pleased with him, was in the form of true visions during sleep, which came to him like daylight.”

5.] The Khadija narreme [i.e. the Prophet’s fleeing home and confiding in his wife what had happened, and her reassuring words to him, “Rejoice, O son of my uncle...”].

6.] The Waraqa-legend [i.e. Muḥammad’s seeking out the counsel of Khadija’s Christian cousin who affirms that he will be the prophet to his people].

7.] The fatra-narreme [i.e. the tale of the temporary cessation of revelation, which caused the Prophet great anxiety and sorrow such that he considered throwing himself off a cliff].

“Proof,” Gregor Schoeler writes, “that [the canonical account of the Call] actually concerns a conglomerate is the fact that practically every element appears in other traditions, isolated and in combination with other motifs.”

A number of these narremes appear in Ibn Sa’d’s Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr as independent traditions. Further proof of the independence of the narremes integrated into the canonical Call-tradition is found in the respective accounts reported by al-Bukhārī and al-Ṭabarī. Common narremes are there used, but deployed in entirely different narrative sequences. The order of the appearance of the narremes in the respective accounts is as follows:

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705 See especially Andrae, “Die legenden.”


707 Ibid.

708 See Uri Rubin, “The Lapse of Revelation (Fatrat al-wadhi),” in idem, Eye of the Beholder, 113-123.

709 “Beweis dafür, dass es sich tatsächlich um ein Konglomerat handelt, ist die Tatsache, dass praktisch alle Elemente in anderer Überlieferung auch isoliert bzw. in Kombinationen mit anderen Motiven vorkommen.” Charakter und Authentik, 65.


711 Or “gänzlich abweichender ordnung der eingelnen teile”: Andrae, “Die legenden,” 6; See also Park, “Muhammad’s Call,” 48-49: “the hadīth alleged to have been transmitted through al-Zuhri --- ‘Urwa --- ‘A’ishah contains Muhammad’s experience of true vision in Ibn Ishāq, but true vision plus taḥammul in Ibn Sa’d. At the time of al-Bukhārī, it included true vision, taḥammul and the revelation of Sura 96 merged into a single connected narrative. In al-Ṭabarī, it follows al-Bukhari, and they share many narrative elements, but the context and detailed narrative sequences are entirely different.”
al-Bukhārī: (1) true visions (2) tahanūnū al-nāfūṣ (3) coming of the angel (4) iqrā’-legend (5) Khadija (6) Warqa (7) fathā (8) considers suicide (9) ḥifūq.”

al-Ṭabarī: (1) true visions (2) tahanūnū al-nāfūṣ (3) coming of the numen (4) Khadija I (5) coming of the numen again (6) fathā (7) considers suicide (8) ḥifūq-legend (9) iqrā’-legend (10) Khadija II (11) Warqa.”

712 Al-Bukhārī, Sahīh, IV, 91, Taḥrīr Ruyā, bāb 1, # 1: al-Zuhri < ‘Urwa < ‘Āisha: “(1) The beginning of revelations to the Apostle of Allah, may Allah be pleased with him, was in the form of true visions during sleep, which came to him like daylight. (2) He used to go to Hira’ where he practiced tahanūnū, which is ṣūlābūd, for a number of nights before returning to his family to take provisions for it. He used to take with him the journey food for the stay and then come back to Khadijah to take his likewise again till (3) suddenly al-Ḥaqq came to him while he was in the cave of Hira. (4) The angel came to him and asked him to read. The Prophet replied, ‘I do not know how to read.’ The Prophet added, ‘The angel caught me (forcefully) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it anymore. He then released me and again asked me to read and I replied, ‘I do not know how to read.’ Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it anymore. He then released me and again asked me to read but again I replied, ‘I do not know how to read (or what shall I read?)’ Thereupon he caught me for a third time and pressed me, and then released me and said, ‘Read in the Name of thy Lord, who created’ up to ‘that he knew not (96:1-5).’ (5) Then Allah’s Apostle returned with the Revelation and with his heart beating severely. They covered him till his fear was over; and then he said, ‘O Khadijah, what is wrong with me?’ Then he told her everything that had happened and said, ‘I fear that something may happen to me.’ Khadijah said, ‘Never! But have the glad tidings, for by Allah, Allah will never disgrace you as you keep good relations with your Kith and kin, speak the truth, help the poor and the destitute, serve your guest generously and assist the deserving, calamity-afflicted ones.’ (6) Khadijah then accompanied him to (her cousin) Warqa bin Nawfal bin Asad bin ‘Abdul ‘Uzza bin Quais. Warqa was the son of her paternal uncle, i.e., her father’s brother, who during the Pre-Islamic Period became a Christian and used to write the Arabic writing and used to write of the Gospels in Arabic as much as Allah wished him to write. He was an old man and had lost his eyesight. Khadijah said to him, ‘O my cousin! Listen to the story of your nephew.’ Warqa asked, ‘O my nephew! What have you seen?’ The Prophet described whatever he had seen. Warqa said, ‘This is the same Namus whom Allah had sent to Moses. I wish I were young and could live up to the time when your people would turn you out.’ Allah’s Apostle asked, ‘Will they turn me out?’ Warqa replied in the affirmative and said: ‘Never did a man come with something similar to what you have brought but was treated with hostility. If I should remain alive till the day when you will be turned out then I would support you strongly.’ (7 and 8) But after a few days Warqa died and the Revelation was also paused for a while and the Prophet became so sad as we have heard that he intended several times to throw himself from the tops of high mountains and every time he went up the top of a mountain in order to throw himself down, (9) Gabriel would appear before him and say, ‘O Muhammad! You are indeed Allah’s Apostle in truth’ whereupon his heart would become quiet and he would calm down and would return home. And whenever interruption of revelation used to become long, he would do as before, but when he used to reach the top of a mountain, Gabriel would appear before him and say to him what he had said before.”

713 Al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī, trns. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988) 67-69: al-Zuhri < ‘Urwa < ‘Āisha: “(1) The first form in which the revelation came to the Messenger of God was true vision; this used to come to him like the break of dawn. (2) After that, he grew to love solitude and used to remain in a cave on Hira’ engaged in tahanūnū for a number of days before returning to his family. The he would return to his family and supply himself with provisions for a similar number of days. (3) This continued until al-Ḥaqq came to him unexpectedly, and said, ‘Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God.’ (Describing what happened next,) the Messenger of God said, ‘I had been standing, but fell to my knees; and crawled away, my shoulders trembling. (4) I went to Khadijah and said, ‘Cover me! Cover me!’ (5) When the terror left me, he came to me and said, ‘Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God.’ (6 and 7; see below) He (Muhammad) said: I had been thinking of throwing myself down from a mountain crag, but he appeared to me (8; see below), as I was thinking about this, and said, ‘Muhammad, I am Gabriel and you are the Messenger of God.’ (9) Then he
In al-Bukhārī’s call-report the angel comes to the Prophet in his sleep, apparently with ‘the truth (al-Haqq),’ the truth (presumably) of revelation. This angelophany constitutes Muḥammad’s call-experience, during which the first five verses of sūrat al-‘Alaq are revealed. After awakening and returning home a bit shaken he tells Khadija of his experience. His wife encourages him and accompanies Muḥammad to her cousin Waraqa who, learned in the scriptures, confirms Muḥammad’s experience as a true divine calling. Shortly thereafter, Waraqa dies and revelation to Muḥammad temporarily ceases. This cessation deeply depressed Muḥammad; he contemplated suicide on several occasions, each time prevented by the angel who intervened and reassured him that he is indeed the messenger of Allāh.

In al-Ṭabarī’s account the events transpire differently. While standing in the cave (and thus awake) al-Haqq comes to Muḥammad without the angel (the latter appears only later) and declares to him: “You are the Messenger of God.” There is no Qur’ānic revelation, as in al-Bukhārī. While al-Bukhārī’s wording (ḥattā yan’ahu al-Haqq...fa yan’ahu ‘l-malak, “until the truth came to him...so the angel came to him”) suggests that the angel came to Muḥammad bringing him the truth, al-Ṭabarī’s suggests something else. Al-Haqq said, ‘Read (iqrā’)! I said, ‘What shall I read?’ He took me and pressed me three times tightly until I was nearly stifled and was utterly exhausted, then he said: ‘Read in the Name of thy Lord who created,’ and I read it. (10) Then I went to Khadijah and said, ‘I have been in fear for life.’ When I told her what had happened, she said, ‘Rejoice, for God will never put you to shame, for you treat your kinsfolk well, tell the truth, deliver what is entrusted to you, endure fatigue, offer hospitality to the guest, and aid people in misfortune.’ (11) Then she took me to Waraqa b. Nawfal b. Asad and said to him, ‘Listen to your brother’s son.’ He questioned me and I told him what had happened. He said, ‘This is the Name which was sent down to Moses, son of ‘Imrān. Would that I were a young man now, and would that I could be alive when your people drive you out!’ I said, ‘Will they drive me out?’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘No man has ever brought the message which you have brought without being met with enmity. If I live to see that day, I shall come firmly to your aid.’"

This is an obvious summary with some details left out. However, al-Ṭabarī provides these missing details in a number of accompanying reports. For example, while the ḥātra-legends (6), suicide attempt (7) and ẓufq-legends (8) are only vaguely alluded to in the above account, they are elaborated in an accompanying report from al-Zuhri: “The revelation ceased to come to the Messenger of God for a while, and he was deeply grieved. He began to go to the tops of mountain crags, in order to throw himself from them; but every time he reached the summit of the mountain, Gabriel appeared to him and said to him, ‘You are the Prophet of God.’ Thereupon his anxiety would subside and he would come back to himself. The Prophet used to relate this story as follows: ‘I was walking one day when I saw the angel who used to come to me at Ḥijr’ on a throne between heaven and earth. I was terror-stricken by him, and I went back to Khadijah and said, ‘Wrap me up!’ So we wrapped him up, that is, enveloped him in a cloak, and God revealed: O you enveloped in your cloak, arise and warn! Your Lord magnify, your raiment purify (74:1-3). Al-Ṭabarī, Al-Ṭabarī, History, 76.
is here personified and speaks to Muḥammad.714 There is no mention of the angel here and as W.M. Watt pointed out in his discussion of this account, al-Ḥaqq is a name of God and its usage here suggests a theophany.715 Muḥammad’s reaction to the epiphany is also consistent with a theophany: he falls to his knees trembling and terrified.716 Al-Ḥaqq does not reveal sūrat al-ʿAql here. He only announces to Muḥammad his prophethood. After ‘crawling away’ and returning home Muḥammad does not confide in Khadija as he does in al-Bukhārī’s account: he simply cries to her for a covering. Once he calms Muḥammad considers suicide. At this point the angel appears and reassures him. The iqrait-legend and the Khadija-Waraqa narremes follow here.

These two canonical accounts thus differ radically all while using the same set of narremes to tell the story of Muḥammad’s call to prophethood. Ibn Ishāq’s account quoted above narrates yet a different order of events. The angel comes to Muḥammad in his sleep (apparently in agreement with al-Bukhārī but in contrast to al-Ṭabarī) in the cave of Ḥira with a brocade coverleaf in his hand and reveals the first five verse of sūrat al-ʿAql: the iqrait-legend here. The brocade coverleaf is mentioned by neither al-Bukhārī’s nor al-Ṭabarī’s above quoted accounts. After awaking and beginning his descent down the mountain Muḥammad encounters the angel for a second time against the horizon with his feet parallel: the ufuq-legend. Thus, in contrast to both al-Bukhārī and al-Ṭabarī Ibn Ishāq has both the iqrait-encounter and the ufuq-encounter occur before Muḥammad reaches Khadija at home!


715 Watt, Muhammad at Mecca, 40. Al-Ṭabarī, History, 67 n. 96. See van Ess, “Le Mīrāḡ et la Vision de Dieu,” 50: “Ce ne fut qu’à la suite d’événements circonstanciels que l’on finit par identifier cet ange (al-ḥaqq) avec de la révélation, c’est-à-dire Gabriel.”

716 Rubin, Eye of the Beholder, 109. “The fear with which Muhammad reacts to his first prophetic experience in the story seems to have its origin in biblical conventions of the terror and fright with which prophets and other human beings react to the appearance of God (e.g. Judges 6:22-23; 13:22; Isaiah 6:5).” Watt, Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman, 21: “Part of the fear was probably the old Semitic fear of the divine as of something dangerous, of which there are examples in the Old Testament.” On such reactions to theophany to Savran, Encountering the Divine, Chapter 4 “Human Responses to Theophany” and above.
5.2. The Canonical Call-Account and the Early Quṣṣāṣ (Storytellers)

Who assembled the narrames together to produce this narrative in all its variants? Al-Bukhārī traces this ‘conglomerate’ back to ‘Ā’isha via al-Zuhrī < ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr. But in the earlier Sīra text of Ibn Ishāq-İbn Hishām as well as in Ibn Sa’d only the “true vision” narrenme is traced back to the Mother of the Faithful.717 The call-account proper Ibn Ishāq-Ibn Hishām traces back to ‘Ubayd b. ‘Umayr (d. 687),718 the qāṣṣ (storyteller) in the Meccan mosque under the Caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644). According to Ibn Ishāq-Ibn Hishām Wahb b. Kaysān, a client of the family of al-Zubayr and Ibn Ishāq’s direct informant, was present at a large gathering when he heard ‘Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr (d. 692) ask Ubayd to tell the gathering about the beginning of Muḥammad’s mission. The Meccan qāṣṣ told the canonical tale. Aloys Sprenger suggested in 1839 that Wahb passed the story on to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 712), ‘Abd Allah’s brother, who erroneously attributed it to ‘Ā’isha, ‘Urwa and ‘Abd Allah’s aunt.719 According to G.H.A. Juynboll’s research, however, it was not ‘Urwa but his master student al-Zuhrī who originated the ʿinsād marfuʿ via ‘Urwa < ‘Ā’isha.720 Because the qussāṣ (storytellers, pl. of qāṣṣ) fell into disrepute721 the popular call-narrative, if it were to survive the qasāṣ-purge, had to be traced back to a more reputable source: al-Zuhrī thus replaced ‘Ubayd with ‘Ā’isha.722

The most thorough discussion of this tradition and its origin to date is that of Gregor Schoeler, whose meticulous tradition-history of the tale strongly suggests that the storyteller ‘Ubayd was indeed the source of the canonical call-account as it appears in the Sīra and hadith literature.723 Because ‘Ubayd preached for ‘Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr the

717 Ibn Sa’d, Kitāb al-Tabaqāt al-Kabīr, 1:224.

718 But in the Kufan redaction of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīra by al-ʿUṭāridi (d. 886) the story is traced back to an anonymous source: see Sellheim, “Muhammeds erstes Offenbarungserlebnis,” 5.

719 Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed (Berlin, 1839) 1:339ff.

720 G.H.A. Juynboll, “Early Islamic Society as Reflected in its Use of ʿInsād’s,” Mus 107 (1994): 165 [art.=151-194]. ‘Urwa’s son Hishām, the second (with al-Zuhrī) of the two primary transmitters of ‘Urwa’s materials, does not trace the call-narrative back to ‘Ā’isha, but only to is father.


723 Schoeler, Charakter und Authentie, Chapter II.
tale circulated as a Zubayrid family tradition. ‘Urwa picked it up as such, not directly from Wahb (*pace* Sprenger). It was ‘Urwa who cleansed the tale of its *qāṣṣ*-elements and reworked it into ḥadīth format, according to Schoeler.

While we may not yet be sure who raised the *īsmā‘* of this tradition back to ‘Ā‘isha, it is pretty certain that the Mother of the Faithful was not the source of this ‘Konglomerat.’

Like so much of the *Muhammadlegend*, this call-*Konglomerat* originated in the circles of the popular preachers/storytellers.

It is clear, then that much of the classical Muslim understanding of the Qur’ān rests on the work of popular storytellers, such storytellers being the first to propose particular historical contexts for particular verses. It should be clear that this is the major reason why the exegetical tradition is so unreliable a guide to the original meaning of the Qur’ān and history alike: as might be expected of storytellers, they made up their stories in complete disregard or ignorance of both.

It is, similarly, thanks to the contribution of the storytellers that the historical tradition is so short of authentic information...Storytellers do not distinguish between true and false in the realistic sense of a secular historian...It is because the storyteller played such a crucial role in the formation that there is so little historicity to it. As storyteller followed upon storyteller, the recollection of the past was reduced to a common stock of stories, themes, and motifs that could be combined and recombined in a profusion of apparently factual accounts (emph. added).

While Patricia Crone’s view of the Islamic historical/exegetical tradition may seem a little too pessimistic, it is apparently right on when it comes to the canonical account of Muhammad’s call to prophecy. “The whole story is the invention of a later age,” declared Richard Bell.

5.3. Muhammad’s Call and the Throne-Theophany Tradition

What, then, can we say with some assurance of likelihood about Muhammad’s earliest prophetic experience? “If we follow the Quran,” F.E. Peters suggests, “it began with a

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725 On the *qāṣṣ* and the *Muhammadlegend* see Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 214-230. See also Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997) 113: “The spontaneous movement of the *qāṣṣ*, so profoundly popular and later so maligned, was the foundation of apologetic religious instruction in Islam (Qur’ānic school and Friday sermon)...”


727 Bell, “Mohammed’s Call,” 16.
vision, or a number of visions, that Muhammad first thought was of God Himself.\textsuperscript{728}

Andrae argued as well:

in the Koran there is not the slightest reference to a vision such as that beheld in the cave of Mt. Hira. In order to combat the statement that he was possessed by the ji\textsuperscript{n}i, or spirit, Mohammed refers in two different places (i.e. 53:1-18; 81: 19) to an appearance in which he himself saw that being whose voice had spoken Allah’s word’s into his ear or his heart... The call-vision which was decisive for Mohammed was thus a vision which he saw out in the open.\textsuperscript{729} A being appeared to him whose majesty and glory so filled him with trembling awe as to assure him for all time that the voice which spoke to him did not come from a being of the ji\textsuperscript{n}i species...\textsuperscript{730}

According to the biblical prophetic tradition to which Mu\textsuperscript{h}ammad claimed to be heir the call of the prophet involved a theophany, not an angelophany: maybe an angelomorphic theophany (i.e. God himself appearing in the disguise of a mal\textsuperscript{ā}k, angel), but a theophany nonetheless.\textsuperscript{731} The most awesome of these call-encounters is the throne-theophany. As we saw above, many in the early Islamic community read s\textsuperscript{ū}rat al-N\textsuperscript{a}m [53]:6-9 as an account of the Prophet’s experience of a throne-theophany.\textsuperscript{732} There is even in the s\textsuperscript{ū}ra/\textsuperscript{h}adith literature alternatives to the canonical call-account which involved a throne-theophany.

Yahy\textsuperscript{ā} (b. Kath\textsuperscript{ī}r) reports: I asked Ab\textsuperscript{ū} Salama: “Which part of the Qur\textsuperscript{ā}n was revealed first?” He answered: S\textsuperscript{ū}ra 74 (y\textsuperscript{ā} yyuh\textsuperscript{ā} ’l-muddalath\textsuperscript{ī}r). I said: “But I have been told it is S\textsuperscript{ū}ra 96 (iqr\textsuperscript{ā}’ bismi rabbik\textsuperscript{ā}).” Ab\textsuperscript{ū} Salama answered: “Long ago I put the same question to J\textsuperscript{ā}b\textsuperscript{ī}r b. ‘Abd Allah, and he also said: S\textsuperscript{ū}ra 74. I reacted then the same way you did now: “But I was told it is S\textsuperscript{ū}ra 96,” I said, and he replied: “I can only tell you what I heard from the Messenger of God himself, namely: ‘I (this is Muhammad speaking) had retreated to Mount H\textsuperscript{ī}r\textsuperscript{ā} for contemplation. When I had finished my spiritual exercises I descended to the bottom of the w\textsuperscript{ā}d\textsuperscript{ī}r. I heard a voice calling me, and I looked around, in front of me, behind me, to my right, to my left. (But then) Lo, there He was,\textsuperscript{733} sitting upon a throne (hu\textit{wa} j\textit{ā}l\textit{ī}s ‘al\textit{ā}’ arsh), between Heaven and earth. I went to Kh\textsuperscript{ā}d\textsuperscript{ī}ja and said to her: “Cover me with a mantel and pour cold water on me!” Then the revelation came

\textsuperscript{728} Peters, \textit{Muhammad and the Origins of Islam}, 149.

\textsuperscript{729} Andrae interprets the al-\textit{u}fi\textit{q} al-\textit{muh}b\textit{īn} (“clear horizon”) of 81:23 as indicating in the open and in the full daylight (“offenbar im freien und bei vollem tageslicht,” “Die legenden,” 13).

\textsuperscript{730} \textit{Mohammed}, 46.

\textsuperscript{731} See above.

\textsuperscript{732} See above.

\textsuperscript{733} On reading “there He was” as opposed to “there he was” see: van Ess, \textit{Flowering of Muslim Theology}, 58; Peters, \textit{Muhammad and the Origins of Islam}, 149; Bell, “Mohammed’s Call,” 17.
up upon me: Ya ayyuhā 'l-muddaththir, "O thou shrouded in thy mantle, arise and warn! Thy Lord magnify..."734

The primary issue here is of course which was the first qur'ānic passage revealed: surat al-'Alaq, surat al-Muddaththir, or maybe surat al-Fātīkh, among other contestants.735 Yāhū b. Kathīr is polemicizing against the likely earlier tradition giving surat al-'Alaq pride of place. The throne-vision itself, however, is independent of this chronological issue as it is found in narrative contexts that show no interest in it.736 This vision reported on the authority of the Companion Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah (d. 697) is no doubt another version of the ufuq-legend anchored in the visions recounted in the Qur’ān (53:6-9; 81:23).737 The most important question for our purposes is who is here seen enthroned? He is simply identified as “he, huwa.” In a variant of this tradition reported by al-Bukhārī the Prophet says simply: fara'atu ra'ānī fa-ra'aytu shay'an, “Then I looked up and saw something.”738 In yet another version of this tradition narrated by Yāhū b. Kathīr's rival, al-Zuhrī,739 the throne occupant is specifically identified as the angel Jibrīl:

(The Prophet said:) One day while I was walking, I heard a voice from heaven and I raised up my eyes and lo! (I saw) the angel who used to come to me at Hīrā’ on a throne (harī) between heaven and earth. I was stricken with fear of him, and returned to Khadījah, and said, “Cover me, cover me!” Then Allah revealed: “O thou who art clothed! Arise and warn. Thy Lord do Magnify...”740

In this narration by al-Zuhrī a number of changes have been introduced besides the explicit identification of the enthroned one as the angel. In Yāhū's narration the vision is

734 Al- Bukhārī, Sahih (Eng.), 6:419.
735 See Andrae, “Die legenden,” 15-18
736 E.g. Ibn Sa’d, Kitāb al-Tabaqāt al-Tabīr, 224. See also Andrae, “Die Legenden,” 11.
737 Andrae, “Die legenden,” 11: “That the legend of Jābir is identical with our ufuq-legend cannot be doubted („Dass die legende des GABIR mit unserer ufuq-legende identisch ist, wird man nicht bezweifeln können“). As Sprenger, Leben 1:306, remarked as well the ufuq-legend is identical to that narrated in 81:23 and 53:6-9. See also Kubin, “Iqra’ bi-smi rabbika...” 219; idem, Eye of the Beholder, 110.
738 Al- Bukhārī, Sahih, 6: 418.
740 Al-Tabari, The History of al-Tabari, 76.
Muḥammad’s inaugural vision, that is to say his call experience. In al-Zuhri’s narration, however, the encounter occurs after the fatra or temporary cessation or revelation.\textsuperscript{741} It was al-Zuhri who likely originated the idea of the fatra.\textsuperscript{742} Also, the throne (‘arsh) of Yahyā’s narration is replaced in al-Zuhri’s fatra-account by chair (kursī). The introduction of Ǧibrīl into this tradition is clearly secondary, as Richard Bell saw already in 1934:

this story (of Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah) says nothing about Gabriel, but...seems to imply that what Mohammed saw was Allah himself sitting upon the throne...his apparently caused aversion; for in one form of the story, Mohammed is made to say simply that he saw ‘something’; in other forms, that it was the angel who had appeared to him on Hira’, who thus appeared to him a second time...Gabriel is imported into the story fairly early...The ‘throne,’ however, is appropriate to Allah, not an angel...This tradition...in the form which implied that the vision was one of Allah, was contrary to orthodox sentiment. It must have come into existence before orthodox tradition was fixed.\textsuperscript{743}

Tor Andrae argued the point also:

The sitting on the throne seems to me still a feature that too strongly emerges from Muhammad and his companions’ portrayal of God to be allowed to have originally applied to Gabriel. That is perhaps the reason why in the versions of Zuhrī...the word ‘arsh, which Yahyā Ibn Kathīr has twice, has been interchanged with kursī. One compares also the restraining inhibition („zurükhaltende”) when...instead of a closer description it says only “I saw something.”\textsuperscript{744}

The Qur‘ānic evidence supports the conclusion that the enthroned being could only have been God originally, as Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks point out in their discussion of this narrative:

an analysis of the Qur‘ān’s use of the term throne (Arabic kursī/‘arsh) serves to strengthen the assumption that it is none other than God himself who is referred to here...A survey of the Qur‘ānic data supports the association of the throne exclusively with God. Throughout the Qur‘ān, God is described as “the lord of the throne.” He is rabb al-‘ursh...Q 9:129, 23:86, and 43:82; at Q 27:26 he is uniquely so. In Q 40:15, 81:20, and


\textsuperscript{742} Juynboll, “Early Islamic Society,” 170; “The insertion of the...fatra...is apparently the device introduced by Zuhrī to counter Yahyā’s attack on his earlier igra’ tradition.” Juynboll cites as evidence that al-Zuhri originated the fatra-tradition the Handbook and Concordance of Wensinck which list al-Zuhri as the only traditionist with traditions treating the fatra: “Early Islamic Society,” 171 n. 48. See also Andrae, “Die legenden,” 11-12.

\textsuperscript{743} Bell, “Mohammed’s Call,” 17, 18.

85:15, he is dhū al-‘arsh ("possessor of the throne"). While nondivine thrones are mentioned Qur’ānically in both the story of Joseph and his parents (Q 12:100) and the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:23, 38, 41, 42), neither Gabriel nor any other angel is ever associated with a throne. Indeed, at Q 17:42 (cf. Q 21:22), God is asserted to be uniquely dhū al-‘arsh in distinction even to hypothetical other gods. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Gabriel, a mere angel and thus a creature, would possess a throne.745

Van Ess's interpretation of this throne-vision reported by Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah is therefore probably correct: “The Prophet thus saw God in all his might and glory seated on his throne.”746 This call-report of the Prophet's encountering in an open wādī God sitting on his throne is an ancien alternative to the canonical call-account reporting Muhammad's initial encounter with the angel standing in the air against the horizon.747 The latter is clearly a tendentious exegetical tradition. It is not impossible that the throne-theophany tradition of Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah is as well.748 It could very well have been fabricated by any of those many readers of the Qur’ān criticized by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ who took surat al-Najm [53]:6-9 as an account of a throne-theophany.749 Be that as it may "the general character of this vision agrees with the Qur’ānic (visions)"750 and thus may very well be authentic.751


746 Flowering of Muslim Theology, 58; “Muhammad’s Ascension,” 10.

747 On this throne-theophany account as an „schon befindlichen alten tradition (already anciently situated tradition)” see Andrae, “Die legenden,” 15.

748 Park, “Muhammad’s Call,” 75.

749 See above.

750 Andrae, “Die legenden,” 13: „Der allgemeine character dieser vision stimmt mit der qor’ānischen überein.”

751 Peterson and Ricks, “Throne Theophany/Prophetic Call,” 333 wonders: “What role might the throne-theophany vision, an important component in the account of the prophetic commission of earlier Abrahamic prophets...have played in Muḥammad’s call as a prophet? Representing as it does a very typical Near Eastern literary genre designed to affirm publicly the authority of the prophet, it seems worth investigating whether it originally performed the same function in Muslim belief and may have been as essential a part of Muḥammad’s credentials as a prophet in the ancient Abrahamic tradition.” It seems that we can answer this question in the affirmative. It appears that Muḥammad himself might have used his experience(s) with the divine throne as the authenticating miracle (sign, σημεῖον) of his mission.
5.4. The Jibrilian Redaction: From Theophany to Angelophany

Al-Zuhri's narration with the angel, the *fatra*, and the *kursi* is no doubt secondary to Yahyā b. Kathīr's call-account with throne-theophany. Evidence of a 'Jibrilian Redaction' of this tradition is found elsewhere as well. Most interesting is a later variant of this same vision reported by Jābir b. 'Abd Allah, this time however reported by 'Ā'isha who here claims to be the first in the community to have asked the Prophet had he seen the angel in Ajyād in Mecca. While there,

Jibrīl called to him, “O Muḥammad, O Muḥammad.” (Muḥammad) looked right and left three times but saw nothing. Then he raised his head and lol! There he was on the sky's horizon, one leg folded over the other (*iḥdā riyālahi ‘alā l-ukhrā*). Then he said: “O Muḥammad, (I am) Jibrīl, (I am) Jibrīl” He calmed (the Prophet) then the Prophet (ṣ) fled, until he came upon the people. Then he looked and said nothing. He left from the people and stepped and he saw him. Thus that is (the meaning) of God's words, “By the star when it sets. Your companion errs not nor does he deviate” to his statement “then he descended and hung suspended (53:1-8),” meaning Jibrīl to Muḥammad.753

A similar report is found in Ibn Sa'd's *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās as a call-account.754 Our attention is here drawn to the strange pose struck by the angel on the horizon: one leg folded over the other (*iḥdā riyālahi ‘alā l-ukhrā*). This contradicts the earlier report from Ibn Ishaq where the angel appears on the higher horizon “in the form of a man with his feet juxtaposed.” Where did such an image of the

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752 Bell, “Mohammed’s Call,” 18: “it is fairly evident that this story of the *fatra* and the new beginning with lxiv, 1-7 is a reconciling tradition, which aims at bringing the two traditions, as to which was the earliest revelation into agreement with each other, and to satisfy as far as possible the conflicting claims of both.” See also Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 41: John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1994), 31; Juynboll, “Early Islamic Society,” 170.


754 Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, 1:225: Muḥammad b. ‘Umar < Ibrahim b. Isma’il < Da’wūd b. al-Husayn < ‘Ikrima < Ibn ‘Abbās. When at Ajyād, he saw an angel, with one leg on the other, in the horizon, and calling: O Muḥammad! I am Gabriel...The Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, was terrified. Whenever he raised his head towards the heaven he saw him; so he returned hastūy to Khadijah and conveyed this information to her. He said: O Khadijah! By Allah, I have never hated anything so much as idols and sooth-sayers, and I am afraid that I shall myself become a sooth-sayer. She said: O my uncle's son, never! Do not repeat this. Verily, Allah will not do this with you, because you fulfill the obligation of relationship, speak truth, return things entrusted to you and your character is noble. Then she went to Waraqah Ibn Nawfal and it was...”
angel with crossed legs on the horizon come from? Clearly, if Jibrīl is standing on the horizon, the preferred picture, it would have been terribly difficult for him to strike such a pose.  

The image instead originated with certain anthropomorphist traditions in which God is said to sit on his throne in that manner. It is reported from Qatāda b. Nu'mān: “When Allah was relieved from His creation he established Himself on His Throne (istawā' ‘ala ‘arshihī) and reclined (istalqa) and placed one of His legs on top of the other (wa wada’a ihda rijlayhi ‘ala al-ukhra).” Ibn Abī ‘Āşim, in his Al-Sunna narrates also: “When Allah finished His creation, He laid down (istalqayo) and placed one of His legs over the other.”  

Ka'b al-Aḥbār forbade al-Ash'at b. Qays from sitting with his legs crossed proclaiming: “It is the Lord who sits like that! (innahā jilsatu r-rabbī ta‘ālā).” Tor Andrae, Geo Windgren and van Ess are therefore likely correct in suggesting that this image of the angel on the horizon with his legs crossed was originally Allah seated on His Throne on the horizon, as it is written, “Possessor of a beautiful make, He held Himself upright on the Throne, while He was on the highest horizon (53:6-7).” Van Ess is no doubt correct: “Il faut lire ces textes as des palimpsests.” The throne and God have disappeared in the 'Ā'isha-report and all that remains is the angel in this throne posture without a throne.

755 As van Ess, “Le MIRAC et la Vision de Dieu,” 44 notes this is a “posture assez malaisée pour ‘se tenir debout’ mais bien convenable pour quelqu’un qui est «assis»”.


757 Ibn Fūrak, Mushkil al-hadīth 128ff.


759 Windgren, Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and his Ascension, 126.

760 van Ess, “Le MIRAC et la Vision de Dieu,” 44.

761 Ibid.
Chapter VI:

Did Muḥammad See His Lord?
The Ruʿya Controversy Among the Ṣaḥāba and the Tābiʿīn

6.1. The Controversy According to Ḥadīth

Gibril Fouad Haddad, in his short study on “The Vision of Allah in the World and the Hereafter” notes:

Many sound reports show that the Companions differed sharply whether the Prophet (ṣ) saw Allah or not. Ibn ‘Abbas related that he did, while Ibn Masʿūd, ‘A’isha, Abu Hurayra, and Abu Dharr related reports to the contrary, stating that the verses of Sura (ṣīc) al-Najm and other Suras referred to Jibril, and that the Prophet (ṣ) said that he saw light.⁷⁰²

As Shaykh Hadidād rightly points out here, many ḥadīth reports give the impression of intense controversy among the Ṣaḥāba (Companions of the Prophet) over the question of Muḥammad’s visionary encounter with God. Less sound, however, is Haddad’s suggestion that Ibn ‘Abbas, the cousin of the Prophet and famed qurʾānic exegete, was the lone advocate of the Prophet’s Visio Dei, while Ibn Masʿūd, ‘Ā’isha, Abū Hurayra, and Abu Dharr denied it because they read sūrat al-Najm as an account of angelophanies rather than theophanies. In fact many more persons were involved in this discussion according to the reports, and the numbers are clearly on the side of the advocates. Also, Haddad has conflated two opinions that don’t necessarily go together: the opinion that sūrat al-Najm is to be read as an account of angelophanies rather than theophanies on the one hand and the opinion that Muḥammad did not see God on the other. The latter opinion does not necessarily follow from the former. Granted, many who adopted the Jibrilian reading of sūrat al-Najm also – even consequently – denied that Muḥammad ever

saw God. Many others did not, however. That is to say, even some of those who argued that the early Meccan visions recounted in sūrat al-Nāṣr were visions of the angel still affirmed that Muḥammad did see God at a later date, in Medina for instance. We shall return to this point below.

The editors of al-Dāraquṭnī’s (d. 995) important Kitāb al-Ru’ya are a bit more perceptive in their reading of the sources:

The fifth problem regarding the Prophet’s vision of his Lord Most High in this world. The Salaf and the Khalaf disagree irreconcilably (ikhtilāfīn mutabbayin) over this issue, some affirming, others denying, while others suspending judgment (al-mukawwqif). As for those who affirm that (the Prophet) saw his Lord Most High there is a group of the Sahāba and the Tābi‘īn and others. ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAbbās, Interpreter of the Qurʾān, and Anas b. Mālik, Abū Dharr, and it is reported on the authority of Abū Hurayra, and Ibn Masʿūd...and Kaʿb al-Aḥbār...

As for those who are of the opinion that the Prophet did not see his Lord Most High, a group of Sahāba and the Tābi‘īn also: our Mother ʿĀ’isha and Ibn Masʿūd. And it was disputed regarding him and Abū Hurayra and Abū Dharr.763

According to this reading of the sources Ibn ʿAbbās does not stand alone in his advocacy of the Prophet’s experience of Visio Dei. With him were other famed Companions such as Anas b. Mālik, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, and Abū Dharr. The problem is that the latter, along with the other noted Companions Abū Hurayra and Ibn Masʿūd, are also listed among those who denied al-Ru’ya. This is the Doppeligsicht or ‘double-face’ phenomenon pointed out by Tor Andrae in his foundational discussion of this controversy.764 That is to say, the same names will often appear on both sides of a controversy advocating diametrically opposed positions. It is thus difficult on first sight to discern anyone’s true stance in these discussions assuming, of course, that such a discussion actually took place (see below). As we will demonstrate here many of the Doppeligsichten are artificial. That is to say, the sources don’t really support the existence of two positions for an individual, but later scholars have without warrant created such an impression. Also, those involved in the controversy are more numerous than even the above reading of the sources admits. In this chapter we will list all of the major

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764 Die Person Muhammeds, 74f.
participants in this controversy as well as their recorded positions, as best as we have been able to find them.

6.1.1. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 688)

Also called al-Ḥibr (“the Doctor”) and al-Bahr (“the Sea”) Ibn ‘Abbās is reputed to have been the first interpreter of the Qur’ān. His person as found in the sources is largely legendary however. Nonetheless, it is no doubt he who is most often associated with the affirmation of Muhammad’s vision of God. We learn from Ibn ‘Abbās that God singled three prophets out for special blessings: Ibrāhīm (Abraham) was made the friend (Khalīl) of God, Mūsā (Moses) spoke to God, and Muḥammad saw God.

[A.] Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna < Mujālid b. Sa’īd < ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥārith:

Ibn ‘Abbās met Ka‘b (al-Ꭺḥbār) at ‘Arafat and asked him concerning a certain thing. Then he said, ‘God is great,’ until the mountains returned the echo. Then Ibn ‘Abbās said, “We belong to the Banū Ḥashim. We say: Verily, Muhammad saw His Lord twice.” Ka‘b replied, “Verily God Most High divided His vision and His conversation between Muḥammad and Mūsā. He spoke to Mūsā twice; and Muḥammad saw Him twice.”

Ka‘b’s claim that Moses spoke to God twice is probably based on the two accounts in Q 19:52 and 7:143. A theocentric interpretation of sūrat al-ʿNājm, particularly vs. 7 and 14, was undoubtedly behind Ibn ‘Abbās’s claim that Muḥammad saw God twice.

Such an interpretation is offered in another report:

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765 See EI’ I:40f. s.v. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās by L. Vecchia Vaglieri.


[B.] Al-A’marsh (Sulaymān b. Mihran) < Ziyād b. al-Ḥasīn < Abū al-‘Āliya < Ibn ʿAbbās:

(Regarding the āya) “The heart lied not concerning that which he saw (53:11)” (Ibn ʿAbbās) said: “(Muḥammad) saw his Lord, May He be Exalted and Great, with his heart twice.” (Regarding the āya) “He indeed saw Him at another descent by the Lote-tree of the Boundary (53:14)” he said: “He saw His Lord.” (Regarding the āya) “Till He was the measure of two bows or closer. Then He revealed to His servant what He revealed (53:9-10)” Ibn ʿAbbās said: “Indeed the Prophet saw Him.”\footnote{al-Dāraqūṭnī, Kitāb al-Ruʿya, 351 #274; al-Nawawī, Shāhih ʿĀthār Muslim, 2:8 #285.}

The famed muḥfassir is here presented as reading the verb of 53:11 with takhfīf (kadhaba) rather than with tāṣhīd (kadhdhaba). It was therefore a muʿāba bi ’l-qalb (vision of the heart), not a muʿa bi ’l-baṣār (vision of the eyes). Muslim reports in his Sahih from Ibn ʿAbbās that Muḥammad “saw Allāh with his heart (twice).”\footnote{Sahih (English) 1:111, #334; al-Nasaʾī, Sunan, 10: 275 #11471; Ibn Hānbal, Musnad, 3:425 #1956.} It is here, however, where we get our first, and only, glimpse of Ibn ʿAbbās’s Doppelsicht in this particular controversy. Ibn Fūrak reports from ʿIkrima, freed servant of Ibn ʿAbbās, that the latter said regarding “Indeed he saw Him at another descent (53:14)” “Muḥammad saw his Lord with his eyes so that there appeared to him the crown covered in pearls.”\footnote{Ibn Fūrak, Mushkil al-ḥadīth 386.} Al-Baghawī and al-Suyūṭī report from Ibn ʿAbbās this same opinion that he saw God with his eyes.\footnote{Al-Baghawi, Tafsīr al-Baghawi, 4:247; al-Suyūṭī, Tafsīr al-Durr al-maṭnūr, 7:647.} Ibn Ḥajār and al-Suyūṭī report that Ibn ʿAbbās said once, “Muḥammad saw his Lord twice: once with his eyes and once with his heart.”\footnote{Ibn Ḥajār, Fath Būrū, 8:608; al-Suyūṭī, Tafsīr al-Durr al-maṭnūr, 7:647.} We are told that the “Interpreter of the Qurʾān” read Q 17:60 “We did not make the vision which we showed thee…” as an indication that the Prophet saw God during his Isrāʾ or Night Journey to Jerusalem with his eyes.\footnote{Thus reported Sufyān b. ʿUyayna: Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, 202.} Qāḍī ʿIyād’s (d. 1149) confidence therefore is almost understandable when he declares: “The best known opinion is that he saw his Lord with his eyes. This is related from (Ibn ʿAbbās) by various paths of transmission.”\footnote{Al-Shiḥa, 101.} Still, there are enough reports attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās in support of both positions to make it impossible identify one of them as his likely
position.

[C.] Salm b. Ja'far < Al-Hakam b. Abān al-'Adanī < 'Ikrima:

Once I ('Ikrima) asked Ibn 'Abbās if Muḥammad had seen his Lord. He answered: “Yes, he saw Him as if He had His feet in verdure, and in front of him a curtain (ṣīr) of pearls.” Following which, 'Ikrima said to Ibn 'Abbās: “Didn‘t God say: lā tudrikūhu l-abṣārū (6:103)?” Ibn ‘Abbās answered: “God wanted to speak of His light: when He appeared in His light, nothing can reach Him (lā yudrikūhu shay). [Muḥammad indeed saw his Lord twice.]”

God is here seen behind a screen or curtain, though only his feet are described: they are “in verdure.” This description of the feet might suggest an averted gaze here, except that in other similar reports the curtain is specifically placed before the face of God. What is noticeable here is that even with the presence of the veil intervening between God and Muḥammad it is affirmed that the Prophet saw God. We have come to expect something different. The hijāb is supposed to be prohibitive (al-mā‘īn) in regards to ru‘ya. “(A) veil conveys the idea of a separation that excludes a visual perception,” says Ary Crollius. Here, however, it is the veil that makes vision of God possible. This is indicated by Ibn ‘Abbās’ interpretation (or the interpretation here attributed to him) of sūrat al-An‘ām [6]: 103, “Vision comprehends Him not.” According to Ibn ‘Abbās’ response the verse indicates that eyes don’t idrāk God when he appears in his light, presumably his divine light (as opposed to his “veil of light”; see below). When God appears in his jalāl or luminous splendor, lā tudrikūhu l-abṣār. But because God’s jalāl is here veiled Muḥammad is able to see him. The veil or curtain is here permissive (mubāh) rather than prohibitive, and this probably because it is protective. Al-Bayḍawi (d. 1280) thus says concerning sūrat al-Shūrā [42]: 50 that the expression min warā‘i hijābin (“from behind a

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777 Khudratin. Gimaret, Dieu à l’image de l’homme, 154 n. 3, says we are undoubtedly to understand by this expression a lawn or prairie.

778 See e.g. the report from Umm al-Tufayl below.

779 Thus Were They Hearing, 41. Watt, Muḥammad’s Mecca, 62 likewise assumed that that revelation from behind a veil “implies hearing without seeing.”
veil") “is an indication of the letting through of a vision, not of its being withheld.”\(^{780}\) This language suggests a translucent veil.

This is consistent with the biblical tradition of the veiled presence of God. “Because the radiance and splendor of God are so overwhelming, because no man can look on him and live (Ex 33:17-23; Jn 1:18; 6:46; I Tm 6:15, 16), that splendor is concealed within the cloud to protect man from his presence (Ex 16:10; 19:16-20; 24:15-17; Pss 18:11, 12; 97:2,3).”\(^{781}\) Still, “The cloud theophany...is a visible expression of the presence of God.”\(^{782}\) The veiled image of God would be similar to “the approach of towering black clouds lighted from within by so-called sheet lightning.”\(^{783}\)

Ibn ‘Abbās’ response also indicates that Muḥammad’s vision of the veiled deity was a \(rū’ya\) bi \(l-bāṣar\) (vision of the eyes). The veil here is thus not the dream-vision (\(rū’ya\) bi \(l-qalb\)) that some commentators say the \(mīn\) \(wārā’i\) \(hijābīn\) of \(sūrat\) \(al-Shūrā\) [42]:50 signifies.\(^{784}\) This is confirmed in a related ḥadīth. A listener objects to Ḥakima’s narration from Ibn ‘Abbās that the Prophet saw his Lord with this same verse (6:103) and Ḥakima gives a somewhat different reply than that above, yet still affirming a \(rū’ya\) bi \(l-bāṣar\).

Ibn ‘Abbās said, “He saw Him descend another time (53:13),” meaning the Prophet saw his Lord. A man said to [Ḥakima]: “Didn’t He say, ‘Vision comprehends Him not and He comprehends all vision.’” Ḥakima said to him: “Do you see the sky?” He said yes. He said, “[Do] you see all of the sky?”\(^{785}\)

As noted above Ḥakima distinguishes between \(iḍrāk\), which he takes to imply a total perception of a thing, and \(rū’ya\), specifically \(rū’ya\) bi \(l-bāṣar\), the simple act of seeing. To see a thing with the eyes does not imply that the viewed is fully perceived (\(iḍrāk\)) by the viewer.

\(^{780}\) Al Bayḍawī, \(Anwâr al-tanzil wa asrār\) (Cairo, n.d.) ad \(sūrat\) \(al-Shūrā\) [42]:50. Quoted from Crollius, \(Thus\ \(W\)ere They Hearing, 41.

\(^{781}\) \(Baker\ Encyclopedia of the Bible\) 2:1695-6 s.v. Pillar of Fire and Cloud.

\(^{782}\) Ibid., 1696.

\(^{783}\) The words of F.M. Cross, Jr. regarding the approach of the Israelite “storm-god”: \(Canaanite\ Myth\ and\ Hebrew\ Epic, 169.

\(^{784}\) See above.

\(^{785}\) Al-Ṭabarî, \(Jami‘ al-bayān, 27:52; Ibn\ Abî ‘Āṣim, \(Al-Sunnah, 1:307.\)
Thus, while Muḥammad indeed saw God, this ‘seeing’ did not afford him a complete perception of the Divine Majesty.

These two traditions present a scenario distinctly different from what we find in sūrat al-Najm. There the implication is that Muḥammad did see the unveiled majesty of God. The stress on his eyes not swerving in v. 17 suggests that the expectation is that his eyes would have or should have swerved and this ‘averted gaze,’ we discovered above, is the viewer’s protection against the effects of seeing God’s brilliant majesty.786 The averted gaze would be unnecessary before the protectively veiled presence of God except as a display of humility. The implication of v. 17 is not however that Muḥammad’s steady gaze was a mark of arrogance or pomposity, such as that attributed in some rabbinic sources to the elders of Israel on Mount Sinai who “feasted their eyes” on God instead of humbly averting their gaze.787 Our discussion of Q.53:11 suggested that “his heart lied not concerning what he saw” indicated a positive valuation of Muḥammad’s heart which allowed him to properly perceive his visitant.788 The visions recorded in the above traditions would thus not be identical with those alluded to in sūrat al-Najm [53]: 1-18.


[‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Salama] narrates: [One day], ‘Abd Allāh b. Umar (the son of second Caliph) sent [a messenger] to ask ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās if Muḥammad had seen his Lord. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās made him answer yes. ‘Abd Allāh b. Umar sent him his messenger again, to ask him how he had seen Him. [Ibn ‘Abbās] had him answer that he had seen Him in a verdant garden, [in the form of a young man (ṭāḥhāb)]789 having under him a carpet of gold, [and also] on a footstool of gold that carried four angels, an angel in the

786 See above.


788 See above.

789 See e.g. Ibn Fürak, Mushkil al-Hadith, 386: Ibn ‘Umar to Ibn ‘Abbās: “Did the Messenger of God see his Lord?“ “Yes, he saw Him in His form (ṣūratih) on a golden throne, veiled with a golden cover, in the form of a young man (ṭāḥhāb ‘rajîl).” On this image of God in the form of a young man see below.
form of a man, an angel in the form of a bull, an angel in the form of an eagle, an angel in the form of a lion.\textsuperscript{790}

A remarkable image! This is clearly an Islamic version of the paramount manifestation of the \textit{kābōd yhwh} found in the Book of Ezekiel.

And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind...and out of the midst thereof came four living creatures...As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man and a lion, on the right side: an ox and an eagle on the left...And above the firmament that was above their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the appearance of a man above it...And this was the appearance of the likeness of the \textit{kābōd yhwh} (Ezek. 1:4-28).

David Halperin has demonstrated the likelihood that seventh-century Arabian Judaism was aware of some \textit{Merkabah} traditions and through them some later Muslims probably learned to identify the \textit{hamalat al-‘arsh} or “Throne-bearers” of the Qur'an (40:7; 69:17) with the \textit{hayyōt} or living creatures associated with the divine throne in Ezekiel's vision.\textsuperscript{791} Halperin uncovers intriguing evidence that Muhammad himself came into contact with this Arabian Jewish \textit{Merkabah} speculation.\textsuperscript{792} Halperin took a close look at the Islamic traditions concerning Ibn Šayyād, the Jewish youth of Medina and contemporary of Muhammad there who claimed to be a prophet himself and, consequently, is cast in later Muslim tradition as al-Dajjāl, the Muslim antichrist.\textsuperscript{793} The early Ibn Šayyād traditions, Halperin suspects, are authentic, fragmentary reports of contact between Muhammad and his Jewish rival in Medina. The traditions are inconvenient and at times quite embarrassing from a Muslim perspective (a sentiment evidenced by Muslim treatment of the traditions\textsuperscript{794}); it is hard to imagine a Muslim traditionist fabricating these reports. Nor do these fragments show any political or sectarian tendency.\textsuperscript{795}

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{791} “Appendix II: Islamic Reflections of Merkabah Traditions,” in idem, \textit{Faces of the Chariot}, 467-490.


\textsuperscript{793} See the Arabic sources cited and discussed in Halperin, “Ibn Šayyād Traditions.”

\textsuperscript{794} Ibid., 216, 219.

\textsuperscript{795} Ibid., 216.
\end{footnotes}
Most important for our discussion is the fragment unit that Halperin labels the Throne-Unit. These fragments depict a conversation between Muḥammad and Ibn Ṣayyād, apparently while the latter is experiencing a Merkabah vision.

[A] The Apostle of God said to Ibn Ṣā‘īd⁷⁹⁶, what do you see?
He said, “I see a throne upon the sea (bahr; var., mā‘, water), around it al-hayyāt (var., hayyāt).”
The Apostle of God said, “He sees the Throne of the Devil (‘arsh īblīs).”⁷⁹⁷

[B] The Prophet said to him, “What do you see?”
He said, “I see a throne above the water.”
The Prophet said, “He sees the Throne of the Devil above the sea.”⁷⁹⁸

Josef van Ess, who has also looked at these traditions, notes: “Il semble donc qu’Ibn Ṣayyād ait prétendu avoir eu une vision de Dieu, tout comme Muḥammad.”⁷⁹⁹ The Qur‘ān locates God’s throne upon water (11:7). Rumors circulated that al-Rahmān, i.e. Allāh but also the God of the South Arabian Jews, had visited Ibn Ṣayyād, but “in darkness,” viz. not as a luminous being but in a terrifying appearance.⁸⁰⁰ This interpretation that Ibn Ṣayyād had seen Īblīs rather than God is not likely his.⁸⁰¹ Halperin has pointed out that hayyāt, the term used in the first and probably earlier fragment to describe those around the throne,⁸⁰² is an Arabized form of the Hebrew hayyōt, the living creatures that bear the divine throne in Ezekiel 1.⁸⁰³ Halperin therefore suggests that Ibn Ṣayyād’s vision evinces Merkabah mysticism. Van Ess disagrees however:

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⁷⁹⁶ Variant of name found in the sources.


⁷⁹⁹ Van Ess, “Le MIRÅG et la Vision de Dieu,” 44: “It seems that Ibn Ṣayyād had pretended to have had a vision of God just like Muḥammad.”

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid.; idem, “Muḥammad’s Ascension,” 15.


⁸⁰² The first fragment appears in Ibn Hanbal’s (d. 855) collection; the second appears in Tirmidhī’s (d. 892).

Mais nos sources visent autre chose: Ibn Šayyād prétendait être l’égal du Prophète; il aurait eu les mêmes expériences mais de façon negative. Effectivement la ressemblance avec l’image du Trône de la sourate 53 est éclatante.\footnote{Van Ess, “Le MPRAGAIN la Vision de Dieu,” 44: “But the sources aim at something else: Ibn Šayyād pretended to be the Prophet’s equal; he would have had the same experiences but in a negative way. In fact, the resemblance to the picture of the Throne of sûra 53 is clear.”}

If the resemblance to the (throne-)vision of sūrat al-Najm is clear, the resemblance to the throne-vision of the Ibn ‘Umar-Ibn ‘Abbās exchange is the more so. In the Ibn Šayyād fragment [B] the ḥayyāt disappear: the demonic throne is described simply as “above the sea/water.” The later identification of the qur’ānic hamala al-‘arsh or “Throne-bearers” with Ezekiel’s ḥayyāt may account for this disappearance. Once the ḥayyāt were identified with the throne of God, as in the above ḥadīth al-ra‘ya, they could no longer serve as bearers of the throne of Iblīs.


[Ibn ‘Abbās] narrates: [One day,] the Messenger of God said: “My Lord came to me tonight, under the most beautiful form (fi ʾaḥsāmi ʾsūratīn)—I think, says [Ibn ‘Abbās], that he meant “during my sleep.” “And He said [to me]: ‘Oh Muhammad, do you know what the Exalted Assembly is disputing?’ — ‘No,’ I responded. Then He put His hand between my shoulder blades, to the point that I felt its coolness between my nipples, and I knew from that moment [all] that is in the heavens and on the earth. He said [to me]: ‘[And well,] oh Muḥammad, do you know what the Exalted Assembly (al-mala‘ al-dā‘)\footnote{Ibn Hanbal, Musnad', 3:437; #3483; Al-Tirmidhī, Jām‘ al-Saghīr, opud al-Mubārakfūrī, Tadhka al-abwadhi, 9:101ff., #3286; Al-Bayhaqī, Al-Asma‘ wa al-Sifāt, 2:300; Al-Dāraqūṭī, Kitāb al-Ra‘ja, 329 #244; Abū Ya‘lā al-Mawṣili, Musnad Abī Ya‘lā al-Mawṣili (ed. Ḥusayn Salīm Asad; Damascus: Dār al-Ma‘mūn lil-Turāth, 1984-), 4: 475, #281.} is disputing?”—‘Yes,’ I said: of atonements and of degrees. [—And what are atonements and degrees? Atonements, that is to live in the mosque after the canonical prayer, to go on foot to the gatherings, to proceed as it is necessary to the ablution when it is disagreeable... (...) And the degrees, it is to spread greetings, to give to eat [to the needy], to pray all night while people sleep.’\footnote{Fudayl b. ‘Amr al-Fuqaymī < Ibrāhīm al-Nahārī < ‘Alqama b. Qays < ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd: “The Messenger of God answered: God is beautiful (jamāl). He loves beauty.” Muslim, Sahīh, iii:47, 147; Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-Tanwīh, 384.}

The God of Muḥammad is beautiful, we are told in another ḥadīth, and he loves beauty.\footnote{The Islamic version of the ANE/biblical “Divine Council.” See Q 37:8; 38:69; EQ 1:462-463 s.v. Court by Khalid Yahya Blankship.} We now learn that this includes morphic beauty. Ignaz Goldziher saw in this
family of reports “flagrant anthropomorphism.” 808 Indeed, the physical contact between Lord and Prophet here described is not only the “summit of intimacy” as Josef van Ess has described it, 809 but the summit of corporeal expression as well: Allâh physically touches Muḥammad. Such a theophany offended the sensibilities of the anti-anthropomorphist theologians who subjected the report to de-anthropomorphizing interpretations. 810 Other scholars tried to impugn the authenticity of the ḥadîth. 811 But the traditionalists generally accepted it. 812 This report and its variants is narrated on the authority of 12 other Companions: Muʿadh b. Jabal, 813 Jâbir b. Samura, 814 Abû Hurayra, 815 Anas b. Mâlik, 816 Abû Umâma, 817 Abû ʿUbayda b. al-Jarrâḥ, 818 ʿAbd al-Rahîm b. ʿA’îs, 819 Thawbân, mawla rasûli llah, 820 ʿAbd Allâh b. ʿUmar, 821 Abû Râfî, 822

808 Goldziher, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, 107.


810 The Ashʿarîte Ibn Fûrak, for example, recounts in his Mushkil al-ḥadîth wa bayâmah, 70f, several interpretations advanced by the theologians: either the most “beautiful form” refers to the Prophet who saw God while in this state, or it refers to a created form used by God to communicate to His Prophet, or even the form of an angel in which God inerethes. The muhaddithûn polemicized violently against these hermeneutics (see below). For a discussion of this ḥadîth see Daniel Gomar, Dieu à l’image de l’homme, 143ff; idem, “Au Coeur du MPRA, un Hadîth Interpolé,” in Amir-Moezzi, Le Voyage Initiatique en Terre D’Islam, 67-82.

811 The Ashʿarîte Al-Bayhaqî (d. 1066), Al-Asmaʿ wa al-Sifât, 2:79 declared “all of [the reports] are daʿîf (weak)” and Ibn al-Jawzî (d. 1200) said, “It is not sound” (Daf Shuhûb al-tashhîh bi-akaff al-tanzîh [’Ammân: Dâr al-Imâm Nawawî, 1991], 149).

812 See following notes.


814 Al-Suyûṭî, Taqṣîr al-Durr al-manthûr, 7:203, sûra Sad.


‘Abd al-Rahman b. Sābiṭ,823 and Abu al-Darda’.824 This tradition is reported by Ibn Ḥanbal, Al-Tirmidhī, Abū Ya‘lā al-Mawṣilī (d. 919), ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Dārimī (d. 869), ‘Uthman al-Dārimī (d. 895)825 Ibn Abī ‘Aṣim (d. 900), al-Ṭabarānī (d. 971), Al-Lakītā’ (d. 1027), Nur al-Dīn al-Haythamī (d. 1405), Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). Ibn Ḥanbal judged it ṣaḥīḥ.826 Al-Tirmidhī judged it ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ and said: “I asked Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl (al-Bukhārī) about this ḥadīth and he said: ḥadīḥa ṣaḥīḥ (‘This is sound’).”827 Khalīlūn Ḥadīb declared, “The ḥadīth is ṣaḥīḥ. It was reported by a group of Companions, among them: Mu‘ādh b. Jabal, Ibn ‘Abbas, ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Ā‘is, Ibn ‘Umar, Abū Hurayra, and Anas, may God be pleased with them”828 and Ibn Mandah, in his Al-Maṣdar al-Sābiq said also: “This ḥadīth is reported from ten (sic) Companions of the Prophet; and the Imāms of the countries, from the people of the east to the west, relayed it from them.”829 Thus, whatever its actual status vis-à-vis authenticity, traditionalist Sunnism embraced the report.

Besides the “flagrant anthropomorphism” our attention is also drawn to Ibn ‘Abbas’s suggestion that the Prophet meant that God came to him in his sleep (ahsabuhu ya‘nī ʿfī ‘n-

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821 Al-Dārāaqūṭī, Kitāb al-Rūʿa, 366 # 252; al-Haythamī, Kitāb majma’ al-bahrayn, 369, #11743.


829 Apud al-Dārimī, Nāqi, 2:734.
In the versions of this ḥadīth, call it hadīth aḥsan šūra ("report of the ‘beautiful form’"), on the authority of Muʿadhd b. Jabal and Anas b. Mālik the Prophet explicitly says he saw God while asleep.\textsuperscript{830} This would then be a dream theophany. This contradicts the plain sense of the Qurʾānic description of Muḥammad’s visionary experience (53:17).\textsuperscript{831} But those Qurʾānic visions would have taken place while the Prophet was still in Mecca. This dream theophany, however, would have taken place in Medina. This is made clear in the preamble to the Muʿadhd b. Jabal report.

[Muʿadhd] narrates: One morning, the Messenger of God took a long time to come join us for the dawn prayer, until the moment where we were on the point of seeing the sun come up. The Prophet then came out hurriedly. They did the second call to prayer, and the Messenger of God did the prayer, but his prayer was short. When he had pronounced the final salutation, he shouted to us: "Remain in rows as you are!" Then he turned towards us and said: "I am going to tell you what made me late this morning. I got up last night [to pray]. I did the ablution, I prayed what destiny wished that I pray; then while I was praying, sleepiness took me, and I fell asleep. And there, in front of me, was my Lord, under the most beautiful form. He said [to me]: “Oh Muḥammad”…\textsuperscript{832}

Also in the report on the authority of Thawbān it is stated: "The Messenger of God left our meeting after the morning-prayer and said [to us]: ‘My Lord came to me tonight in the most beautiful form’…"\textsuperscript{833} Muḥammad therefore recounts this dream theophany after the ritual communal morning prayer, which suggests a Medinan context.\textsuperscript{834} This means the vision would have occurred in Medina. Muḥammad accordingly would have experienced at least three visions of God: two visions \textit{bi-'l-baṣar} in Mecca and one \textit{bi 'l-qalb} in Medina. This circumstance may account for a curious statement attributed to ‘Ikrīma:

‘Abbād b. Manṣūr said: “I asked ‘Ikrīma about God’s statement, ‘his heart lied not concerning what he saw (53:11)’ and he said: ‘You expect that (turād in) I will report to you that (the Prophet) saw his Lord? Yes he saw Him. Then he saw Him. Then he saw Him…”\textsuperscript{835}

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\textsuperscript{830} See above nn. 813, 816. On the variant reading of the Muʿadhd b. Jabal report see below.

\textsuperscript{831} See above.

\textsuperscript{832} See above n. 813.

\textsuperscript{833} See above n. 820.

\textsuperscript{834} On the development of the communal prayer in Islam see e.g. \textit{EQ} 4:215-231 s.v. Prayer by Gerhard Böwering.

Three ‘God-sightings’ are here mentioned. This also may account for the seeming ambivalence attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās over whether Muḥammad saw God with his eyes, his heart, or both on different occasions. Because this vision of God is Medinan and thus distinct from the visions alluded to in sūrat al-Najm a Jābirīan reading of the latter does not necessarily mean that the exegete denies that Muḥammad ever saw God. A clear statement to this effect is given by Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad b. Taymīya (d. 1328):

It is sound (ṣaḥīḥ) from Ibn ‘Abbās that (the Prophet) said “I saw my Lord, Glorious and Most High.” But this was not during the Night Journey. Rather it was in Medina when the Prophet was held back from the morning prayer. Then he reported to them about the Vision of his Lord Most High that night in his sleep... And as for Ibn ‘Abbās’s statement that (the Prophet) saw God twice with his heart then this is based on God’s statement, “The heart lied not concerning what he saw (53:11)” and His statement “Indeed he saw him descend again (53:13)”... It is sound regarding these verse that the one seen here is Jābirī. He saw him twice in his original form...  

Ibn Taymīya supports the secondary Jābirīan reading of sūrat al-Najm but is also an advocate of Muḥammad’s ruʿyāt Allāh because the latter happened later in Medina according to these reports from Ibn ‘Abbās, Muʿadh and Thawbān. This should caution us against assuming that a Jābirīan reading of sūrat al-Najm attributed to a Companion of Muḥammad necessarily means that this Companion denies the Prophet’s ruʿyā.

The dream-theophany is an important means of revelation in ANE, Mediterranean and biblical traditions and a brief look at these traditions may shed some light on this oneiric epiphany allegedly experienced by Muḥammad. Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples, including Israel, understood dreams differently than we in post-Freudian society. We tend to think of dreams as unreal, internal, subjective phenomena. But in these ancient traditions dreams were external experiences in the sleep and genuine divine communications. Ancient dreams fall into three major categories:

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836 In Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qur’ān, 7:450 ‘Ikrima says rather: “Yes. He saw Him, then he saw Him,” i.e. only two sightings.


the message dream, the symbolic dream, and the psychological status dream. Only the first two have revelatory import. They do not originate from the psychology of the dreamer. They come to the dreamer from the outside - from the divine realm.

The symbolic dream consists of imagery, sometimes bizarre, that usually requires the interpretive assistance of an oniocritic. A symbolic dream-report must then include both the dream and its interpretation. While the god may appear in the symbolic dream acting out a scene, theophany proper is not characteristic of these dreams; in the biblical symbolic dream God never appears. In contrast the message dream involves an anthropomorphic theophany and a clear message communicated to the dreamer from the deity. An oniocritic is not usually required. A dialogue between deity and dreamer often ensues, frequently with the deity questioning the dreamer. The actual presence of the deity in the dream is usually stressed. “Overall, the [message-dream] stresses the objective reality of the dream as a genuine epiphany of a deity.”


639 The psychological status dream includes content that reflects the psychological and/or physical status of the dreamer. See Oppenheimer, Interpretation of Dreams, 184; Flannery-Dailey, Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests, 19.

640 Oppenheimer, Interpretation of Dreams, 206.

641 Bar, A Letter That Has Not Been Read, 45; idem, “Dreams in the Bible,” XIII, 113.


643 Gnuse, Dream Theophany, 16.


645 Ibid. 18: “The dream content often stresses the actual presence of the deity.”

646 Flannery-Dailey, Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests, 21. Flannery-Dailey stresses again that the onieric visit from the deity is “an actual epiphany” 37; Versnel, “What Did Ancient Man See,” 48; Oppenheimer, Interpretation of Dreams, 188.
theophany is at times guaranteed by an act of the deity that encroaches upon the waking life of the dreamer. A gesture, for example, might break through such as the hand of the deity leaving a physical token behind or even touching the dreamer.\footnote{Oppenhiem, Interpretation of Dreams, 188, 191; Gnuse, “Dreams in the Night,” 51.} In an Assyrian letter describing a dream-theophany by the god Bêl the supplicant noted: “he (Bêl) placed his hand upon my hand [saying]: ‘My hand [is] upon your hand’.”\footnote{Quoted from Oppenhiem, Interpretation of Dreams, 192.} As Leo Oppenheim observed: “Here, the wording of the divine message is accompanied and underlined by a gesture which breaks through the curtain separating the world of the gods from that of man.”\footnote{Ibid.} Similarly, in what is likely his prophetic call-vision, the prophet Jeremiah experiences a theophany and sees Yahweh extend his hand and touch Jeremiah’s mouth (Jer. 1:9).\footnote{Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel, 182: “This vision contains a theophany, but there are few descriptive details.” See also Habel, “Form and Significance,” 317: “Jeremiah himself makes clear in 23:16-18 that in contrast to the visions of the human imagination which false prophets recount, he stood in the heavenly council (בֹּקֶר) and heard (שָׁמַע) the word (תַּחְתָּן). This בֹּקֶר in Jer 23 is virtually a synonym for the יָתֶן which summons the other prophets with the heavenly council (Ez 1:28 Is 40:3 6:6 46:6). If this is true, then the opening line of Jeremiah’s call may be the summons of Yahweh from the heavenly council in which Yahweh Himself is present to address the prophet (1:7-9), to stretch forth his hand toward the prophet (1:9) as in Ez 2:9, and to make contact with his mouth (1:9 as in Is 6:7);” Jack. R. Lundbom, “Rhetorical Structures in Jeremiah 1,” ZAW 103 (1991): 206 [art.=193-210]; Walther Zimmerli, “Visionary experience in Jeremiah,” in Richard Coggins, Anthony Phillips and Michael Knibb (edd.), Israel’s Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter R. Ackroyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 96-97 [art.=95-118]. This is pace von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 66. “There is no indication... that he saw Jahweh as well as heard him.”} In this case the extended divine hand and touching constitutes Jeremiah’s prophetic sign (תַּחְתָּן).\footnote{William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25, edited by Paul D. Hanson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 29; Habel, “Form and Significance,” 309; J.L. Berquist, “Prophetic Legitimation in Jeremiah,” VT 39 (1989): 132 [art.=129-139].} The biblical dream-theophany report does not include a description of God’s \textit{Erscheinungsform}.\footnote{Bar, A Letter That Has Not Been Read, 16.} On the other hand ANE and Mediterranean dream reports often stress the giganticism and/or beauty of the deity.\footnote{“The dream figure of the deity is quite distinct. The deity may be of gigantic proportions... The figure is sometimes described as being very beautiful.” Gnuse, Dream Theophany, 18; John S. Hanson, “Dreams and Visions in the Graeco-Roman World and Early Christianity,” ANRW II, 23.2 (1980): 1410 [art.=1395-1427]; Flannery-Dailey, Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests, 21; Oppenhiem, Interpretation of Dreams, 189.} The line between a dream-theophany and a
waking theophany was not distinct. They were both considered actual theophanies.\textsuperscript{854} There is, however, a significant difference between the two.

In the Near East...the theophany is the prototype of the 'message dream'...The essential feature of the theophany, however, its dramatic, soul-shocking impact, the shattering inroad of the supernatural into the reality of this world, the terror-inspiring sight of the deity, etc., have disappeared in the transfer from consciousness to dream. The change of reality level acts as a cushion to soften the contact between god and man.\textsuperscript{855}

The issue resolved by the dream-theophany is thus not the problem of anthropomorphism vs. transcendence,\textsuperscript{856} but the problem of the encounter between the holy and the impure and the consequences that follow. As Terence Fretheim explains:

in a dream the whole person, with all senses functioning, is not engaged in the experience, particularly from a physical point of view. Thus, the full engagement of the person, not just the eyes, is seen to make for some difference in the experience. An actual appearance creates the supreme effect. Nevertheless...there is no elimination of the form of God in dream appearances (cf. Gen. 28:13; 15:5).\textsuperscript{857}

It is important to point out here that dream reports across time and space show surprising conformity, being written in standardized patterns that transcend cultural, linguistic and geographic lines. As Frances Flannery-Daily notes: "Ishtar appears in much the same way and for many of the same purposes as Athena and Yahweh."\textsuperscript{858} We might

\textsuperscript{854} Fretheim, Suffering, 88-9: "It is striking that these appearances (in dreams or visions) are referred to later in the respective narratives with no reference to the fact that they occurred in dreams (see Gen. 35:1, 9; 48:3; I Kings 11:9). They are apparently recognized as no different in kind from those which occur during wakefulness..."; Vos, "What Did Ancient Man See," 48; Lichtenstein, "Dream-Theophany," 51; Burke O. Long, "Prophetic Call Traditions and Reports of Visions," \textit{ZAW} 84 (1972): 496 [art.=494-500]. For a discussion on the relation between prophetic dreams and prophetic visions see Bar, \textit{A Letter That Has Not Been Read}, Chapter 5; James E. Miller, "Dreams and Prophetic Visions," \textit{Biblica} 71 (1990): 400-404; Friedrich Horst, "Die Visionsschilderungen der alttestamentlichen Propheten," Evangelische Theologie 20 (1960): 193-205; M. Sister, "Die Typen der prophetischen Visionen in der Bibel," \textit{Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums} 78 (1934): 399-430.

\textsuperscript{855} Oppenheimer, \textit{Interpretation of Dreams}, 192. See further Flannery-Dailey, Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests, 22.


\textsuperscript{857} Fretheim, Suffering, 88-9.

\textsuperscript{858} Flannery-Dailey, Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests, 17. See also Bar, \textit{A Letter That Has Not Been Read}, 9: "The prophetic dreams in the Bible...were set down according to a standard paradigm, which can be traced and reconstructed on the basis of sources that run from Sumeria of the third millennium BCE through the poems of Homer on to Ptolemaic Egypt."
now add Allāh as well. This dream theophany to Muḥammad conforms to the ancient paradigm of the message dream.\textsuperscript{859} The introduction “My Lord came to me (atānī rabbī) tonight” conforms to the technical language used in the ancient message dream report: “But God came (towṣyābo ‘elohîm) to Abimelek in a dream by night (Gen. 20:3; cf. 31:24; Num. 22:20; I Kings 3:5).”\textsuperscript{860} Also consistent with the ancient paradigm is the dialogue that ensues initiated by the deity’s question to Muḥammad; the stress on Allāh’s morphic beauty; and the touch from the divine hand that encroached upon the Prophet’s waking life. The place where God’s hand touched him between the shoulders, we are told, the Prophet honored by the extremity of his turban.\textsuperscript{861}

[F.] Ḥammād b. Salama < Qatāda < ‘Ikrima < Ibn ‘Abbās:

The Messenger of God said: “I saw my Lord under the form of a young man (shābbi) ose beardless (ummād) with curly hair (ṣa’d) and clothed in a green [or: red\textsuperscript{862}] garment (hulla).”\textsuperscript{863}

\textsuperscript{859} Musfīn oneirocriticism likewise distinguishes between literal message dreams and symbolic dreams that require interpretation. In the former, the dream figure – usually the Prophet but also God and the angels – is understood as the actual presence of the Prophet or God/angel. This is based on a popular prophetic hadīth: “He who sees me in a dream sees me in reality, because Satan does not take up my appearance.” (al-Bukhārī, Sahīh, Volume 9, Book 87, # 122, 123, 126; Muslim, Sahīh, Kitāb al ru’ya, # 5635, 5636, 5637; Ibn Hanbal, Musnad’, 5:138, #3410, 304, #3798; see further Leah Kinberg, “Literal Dreams and Prophetic Hadīṣ in classical Islam – a comparison of two ways of legitimation,” Der Islam 70 [1993]: 279-300. According to Ibn Khalidun, al-Muqaddimah (trans. Franz Rosenthal; Princeton University Press, 1967) 80-81 argues: “Therefore, it has been said in the Sahīh ‘There are three kinds of dream visions. There are dream visions from God, dream visions from the angels, and dream visions from Satan.’ Dream visions from God are those that are evident and need no explanation. Dream visions from an angel are true dreams that require interpretation. And dream visions from Satan are confused dreams (translation modified).” On oncric visions of God in Muslim tradition see further Pierre Lory, “La Vision de Dieu dans l’Onirocritique Musulmane Médiévale,” in Todd Lawson (ed.), Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Islamic Thought. Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) 353-363 and below.

\textsuperscript{860} Gnuse, Dream Theophany, 144; idem, “Dreams in the Night,” 35; Oppenheim, Interpretation of Dreams, 188.

\textsuperscript{861} See Qari al-Harawi, Kitāb jam‘ al-wasā’il fi sharḥ al-shamā’il (Istānbūl: Ma’ba’at Shaykh Yabyá, 1874), 209. According to a report on the authority of Ibn ‘Umar, the Prophet used to wind the turban around his head and tuck it in behind him, letting its extremity hang down between his shoulders. (Cf. Tabarānī, al-Kabīr 12:379 #13405).

\textsuperscript{862} Sometimes the hulla is given as hamra’ (red), but mostly as khadīr (green).

If Hebraic notions of the Godhead typically stressed an aged deity with curly white hair and beard, Islam preferred a young, beardless God with black hair. At least this is what we get from the ḥadīth reports. The youthful god motif is of course not peculiar to Islam. The same is found in ancient Egypt, India, and in the exegetical literature of the Rabbis. But while in these traditions the youthful god was only one alternative among several anthropomorphic models, Islam showed a loyalty to the divine youth motif; rarely do we find alternative (anthropomorphic) descriptions of deity.

Shābb is the intermediate stage between a boy before puberty (ṣabī, 15-18 years old) and a mature man (kahl, 30-33 years old). In the Imāmī versions of this ḥadīth, however, the shābb is specifically described as 30 years old. The famous Qur’ānic exegete Muqāṭīl b. Sulaymān (d. 767), who undoubtedly based his ideas of God on the above tradition, stated his Lord was 32 years old. In contrast to the old bearded God this youthful deity of Islam is beardless. Now the Islamic morale advocates wearing a beard. The people of Paradise, however, are beardless, except Mūsā. Adam, too, was created beardless. It was his sons who grew beards due to their father’s sin. Hulla, according to Ibn Manẓūr,

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864 See e.g. Dan 7:9. But cf. below.
865 Josef van Ess, “Youthful God”.
867 Laine, Visions of God, 237. See below.
868 See below.
869 Ritter (Das Meer der Seele, 446 [=Ocean of the Soul, 460], however quotes from Āmidā’s (d. 1233 ?) Abkār al-aghfār the statement: “And some among them (the mujassima, anthropomorphists) say that He has the form of an old man with grey (sic) hair and a grey beard (shaykh asmat al-ra’s wa’t-lībya).”
870 Ibāhīm b. Muhammad al-Khazzāz and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn said: “We met Abū al-Ḥasan (Imām ‘Alī Riḍā, 765-818) and we reported to him that Muḥammad saw his Lord in the form of a fortunate (muwaffaq) young man, his age about thirty years; his feet were in greenness.” The Imām loudly replied in horror: “Whatever you have imagined, you must imagine God as being other than that.” Ibn Bābawayh al-Qumrnī, Kitāb al-tashqīl (Tihrān: Maktabat al-Būzarjumāhī Muṣtafāvī, 1955), 28; Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfī fī Ilm al-dīn, 8 vols. (ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī; Tihrān, 1955-), 1:100f.
872 Van Ess, TG 2:530.
873 Al-Tirmidhī, al-Jāmī’ al-sahīh, janna 8 and 12.
874 See C. Söhöck, Adam im Islam (Berlin, 1993), 121f.
designates an ensemble of two or three items constituting a complete suit.\footnote{Ibn Manẓūr, \textit{Lišās al-ʿArab}, 11: 172.} Most of the reports describe the \textit{hulla} as green, though some say red. It is a green \textit{hulla} that Jibrīl adorns and Muḥammad on the Day of Resurrection will likewise be so attired.\footnote{Ahmad b. Hanbal, \textit{Musnad} (ed. Ahmad Muḥammad Shākir; Egypt: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1949-) (hereafter \textit{Musnad}), 3:456.}

According to Helmut Ritter the thought that God could have a particular form – that of a beardless young man, an idea popular among the Ṣuʿfīs – “was intolerable for orthodox Muslims” who thus “in sum rejected” these reports.\footnote{\textit{Das Meer der Seele}, 445 [=\textit{Ocean of the Soul}, 459]; idem, “Philologica II,” 257.} Both of these claims are anachronistic and, therefore, wrong. Abū Saʿīd ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-Ḍarīmī, a leading traditionalist of Ḥarāt (d. 395) did “totally reject”\footnote{He says \textit{aṣṭoḵoḵahu jidda}. Abū Saʿīd ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-Ḍarīmī, \textit{Naqī ḫal mām Abī Sāʿīd ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd ʿalā al-Maṭāṣ al-aḍhāmi al-anīd}, 2 vols. (Riyāḍ: al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyya al-Sā‘ūdiyya: Maktabat al-Rushd: Sharikat al-Riyāḍ, 1998), 2: 726.} this \textit{ḥadīth al-shābb} from Ibn Ṭālib because it is opposed by contrary reports from Abū Darr and ʿĀʾisha (see below).\footnote{Al-Ḍarīmī, \textit{Naqī}, 2:726; idem, \textit{al-Radd ʿalā al-Jahmīyya} (Cairo, 1985), 53.}

However, this report generally had great support among the \textit{aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth}. Ibn Ḥanbal,\footnote{Ibn Ḥanbal, \textit{Musnad}, 4:350f, #2580.} ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭabarānī,\footnote{Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim, \textit{Al-Sunna}, 2: 484, 503, #’s 1116, 1117, 1168.} Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim,\footnote{Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim, \textit{Al-Sunna}, 1:307, #442.} and Abū Bakr al-ʿArūj\footnote{Ibn ʿAdī, \textit{Al-Rāmi}, 2:677.} reported it in full or \textit{muktaṣar} (abridged).\footnote{Al-Ṭabarānī, \textit{Kitāb al-sunna, apud al-Muttaqī, Kanz al-‘umām}, I:58.} \textit{Criticisms} of this \textit{ḥadīth} - and how could there not be criticisms! - have

\footnote{Ritter’s claim that “the traditions were in sum rejected by the orthodox” is inaccurate for the modern world as well. Ahmad Muḥammad Shākir (d. 1958), editor of Ibn Hanbal’s \textit{Musnad} and clearly the “greatest traditionalist of his time” (G. H. A. Juynboll, “Ahmad Muḥammad Shākir [1892-1958] and his edition of Ibn Hanbal’s \textit{Musnad},” \textit{Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Ḥadīth} [Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1996], 222)” declared: “the Ḥadīth in its essence is \textit{sāḥīḥ}.” Likewise Muḥammad Nāṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī, editor of Ibn Abī
mainly come from those already adverse to the anthropomorphism and tended to focus on Hammād b. Salama. According to Ibn al-Jawzī “this is a ḥadīth that is not affirmed; all of its routes are from Hammād b. Salama.” And, we are assured, Hammād had a foster son, Ibn Abī al-Awjā, who was a zandīq (heretic) and used to interpolate (yadussu) in Hammād’s books these types of aḥādīth. Contrarily, Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mahdī claimed that Hammād didn’t know these aḥādīth until he went to ‘Abbādān, among a settlement of Sufis. He then came back reporting them.

The ashāb al-ḥadīth or traditionalists rejected both of the above accounts. Hammād, for his part, claimed to have gotten the report directly from Qatāda. Yahyā b. Ma‘ān reported a similar account:

I was with Hammād b. Salama and a candid writing came to him censuring him for those aḥādīth he reported - meaning in the Vision - and commanding him to retract them. Hammād said: “I will not do it! I heard them from reliable people and I reported them as I heard them!”

Ibn ‘Adī argued,

Ibn Abī Dāwūd said to us: (Aswad b. ‘Āmir) Shādhān reported this ḥadīth as well as Ibrāhīm b. Abī Suwayd [al-Darra], ‘Affān b. Muslim, and ‘Abd al-Ṣamad b. Kaysān, from Hammād, and al-Ḥakam b. Abān reported it from Zayrik, from ‘Ikrima. These aḥādīth reported from Hammād b. Salama in the Vision and in the people of Paradise’s vision of their Creator, other than Hammād reported them. Hammād is not alone in reporting this so it (the report) is not to be denied.

1 ‘Āṣim, Kitāb al-summa, says of this report: ḥadīth salih rijālırijāl al-Ṣabīḥ “the report is sound. Its transmitters are from the sound hadith collections”: Ibn Abī ‘Āṣim, Al-Summa, 1:311.

888 Ibn al-Jawzī, Daf Shubab al-tashbih, 154, n. 81.


890 Al-Dhahabī, Mizān al-ta’dīl, 1: 594.

891 ‘Abd Allah al-Ḥashidi, editor of al-Bayhaqi’s al-Asmā’ wa ‘l-Ṣifāt, finds these reports problematic as well, in as much as neither Ibrāhīm’s father, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mahdī, who actually narrated from Hammād, nor any of the latter’s companions, mention this. See Al-Bayhaqi, as-Asmā’ wa ‘l-Ṣifāt, 2: 366.


894 Ibn ‘Adī, al-Kāmil, 2:278.
That this report was not to be denied seems to have been the general sentiment among the traditionalists. Yahyā b. Maʿīn said: “Ḥammād is from the best of the Muslims and the People of the Sunna. He is reliable and trustworthy with us. And the ahādīth that he reported in the Vision, we believe in them. He who denies them is with us an innovator. We do not interpret them.”\textsuperscript{895} Abū Bakr b. Ṣadaqa reports hearing the great muḥaddith Abu Zurʿa al-Rāzī (d. 878) say: “The ḥadīth of Qatāda from ‘Ikrima from Ibn ‘Abāṣ in the Vision is sound (ṣaḥīh).” (Aswad b. ‘Āmir) Shādhān and ‘Abd al-Ṣamad (b. Kaysān) and Ibrāhīm b. Abī Suwayd reported it and none denies it except the Muʿtazila.”\textsuperscript{896} This ḥadīth al-shāb (report of the [divine] youth) and its image of God, pace Ritter, would go on to have a significant impact on the Sunnī Gotteslehre.\textsuperscript{897}

6.1.2. Abū Hurayra (d. 678)

Abū Hurayra is a controversial figure. Though he reportedly spent only two years with the Prophet he is the most abundant Companion-narrator of prophetic ḥadīth: a staggering 5000+ according to some estimates (compared, e.g. to the 142 that Abū Bakr’s 23 years with Muḥammad could generate). According to later commentators Abū Hurayra shows a Doppelsicht in this controversy over Muḥammad’s Visio Dei. He is presented as both an affirmer and denier of the Vision. An interesting illustration is in al-Lālikāʾī’s (d.1027) \textit{Sharḥ usūl iʿtiqād ahl l-sunna wa l-jamāʿa}. His chapter discussing “That which is reported regarding the Prophet’s (ṣ) seeing God” is subtitled: “The reports concerning that on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās and Abū Hurayra.”\textsuperscript{898} The chapter includes 11 reports affirming the Prophet’s ruʿya: ten from Ibn ‘Abbās and the other from Abū Hurayra. Al-Lālikāʾī’s editor, Aḥmad Saʿd Ḥamdān, after listing in a note those who affirm the Vision (Ibn ‘Abbās and all of his companions, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, and Abū Dharr) and those who deny it (‘Ā’isha and Ibn Masʿūd), then claims that “both

\textsuperscript{895} Al-Marzubānī, \textit{Kitāb nūr al-qabas}, 1: 48.

\textsuperscript{896} Al-Suyūṭī, \textit{al-Leḍāʾi}, 30; al-Muttaqī, \textit{Kanz al-ʿummāl}, 1:58 (both quoting Al-Ṭabarānī, \textit{Kitāb al-sunna}).

\textsuperscript{897} See below.

\textsuperscript{898} Al-Lālikāʾī, \textit{Sharḥ usūl} 2:512.
positions appear on the authority of Abū Hurayra." Yet there is no statement from Abū Hurayra denying the ruʿya. This Doppelgesicht of Abū Hurayra is artificial. The sources don’t support the presumed ambivalence on his part.


re: “He saw him at another descent (53:13)”; (Abū Hurayra said): “He saw Jibrīl, peace be upon him.”

According to this tradition Abū Hurayra read sūrat al-Najm angelophanically. This is likely the reason he is often placed in that group who denied Muḥammad’s Vision. But as pointed out above the former position does not necessarily imply the latter. Indeed, while Abū Hurayra is not on record explicitly denying the Vision he is on record explicitly affirming it.

[B.] Yūnus b. Bakīr < Muḥammad b. Isḥāq < Dāwud b. Ḥaṣīn < Mawān (b. Ḥakam?):

Mawān asked Abū Hurayra: “Did Muḥammad see his Lord?” He said: “Yes, he saw Him.”


The Messenger of God said: “I saw my Lord, May He be exalted and great, in the most beautiful form. He said to me, ‘O Muḥammad!’ I said: ‘Here I am at Your service!’ He said: ‘Do you know over what the Exalted Assembly dispute’...”

[D.] Abū Hurayra:

The Messenger of God said: “I saw my Lord in a verdant garden curly haired (ja’d qattāṭ)’.

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902 ‘Abd Allāh, Kiṭāb al-Sunnā, 1:175, #217; al-Lālikāʾī, Sharḥ usūl 2:516 #908.


The “paragon of the Sunna” (as he has been called) is thus presented as an advocate of the Prophet’s vision of God in his most beautiful form of a curly-haired youth. The authenticity question could be raised for all of these reports. What is to be noted, however, is that the sources don’t present Abū Hurayra as denying the Vision. They present him as affirming it for Muḥammad (probably while in Medina as the hadith aksan sûra implies) and as reading sûrat al-Najm as visions of the angel. As shown above the two positions are not mutually exclusive. There is thus no evidence in the sources indicating a Doppelgesicht for this Companion.

6.1.3. Anas b. Mālik (d. 709 or 712)

This famed Saḥābī and Anṣārī is presented with only a ‘single face’: he affirmed the Prophet’s Vision of God. According to al-Baghwātī and al-Qurṭubī Anas affirmed a ru‘ya bi ’l-baṣar or vision with his eyes.905


The Messenger of God said: God fashioned Friendship for Abrahām, Direct Speech for Moses, and Visio Dei (al-Ru‘ya) for Muḥammad.”906

[B.] Abū Bahr al-Bakarāwī < Shu‘ba b. al-Ḥajjāj < < Qatāda < Anas:

Muḥammad saw his Lord, Blessed and Most High.907

[C.] Al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ṣubāḥ < Yūsuf b. ‘Aṣīya al-Ṣufār < Qatāda < Anas:

A new day dawned on us and the Messenger of God came and reported to us: “My Lord came to me in my sleep in the most beautiful form, and he placed his hand between my shoulder blades, to the point that I could feel its coolness between my nipples. Then he made known to me everything. And he said, ‘O Muḥammad’…”908

906 Al-Dāraqutni, Kitāb al-Ru‘ya, 190 # 66.
907 Ibn Abī ‘Āṣim, al-Sunnah, 1:306; Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, 199.

The Messenger of God said: I saw (my Lord) in His most beautiful form like a young man with exuberant hair (al-muwaaffir), sitting on the Throne of Grace, around him a golden carpet. He put His hand between my shoulders and I felt its coolness in my liver. He said to me, ‘O Muḥammad’...".909

These last two reports, which clearly are meant to represent the same ahsan şûra dream theophany, may at first sight appear to contradict al-Baghawi’s and al-Qurṭubi’s claim that Anas affirmed a ru’ya bi ‘l-basar or it may suggest that he actually does show a Doppelgesicht in this controversy. This is not necessary, however. Unlike Abū Hurayra, or at least how Abū Hurayra is presented, Anas did not read sūrat al-Najm angelophonically. He read it, according to what has been attributed to him, as evidence of Muḥammad’s visionary encounter with God during the Night Journey/Ascension, which was a real (i.e. physical) event, we are told. Anas could therefore have affirmed both a ru’ya bi ‘l-basar and a ru’ya bi ‘l-qalb occurring on different occasions.

[E.] (‘Abd Allāh ?) b. Wahb < Sulaymān b. Bīlāl < Sharīk b. Abī Namir:

(Sharīk) said: “I heard Anas b. Mālik narrate to us concerning the Messenger of God’s (ﷺ) Night Journey (laylat al-masār): ‘Jibril ascended with the Messenger of God (ﷺ) to the seventh heaven. Then he ascended with him to only God knows where until he (Muḥammad) came to the Lote-Tree of the Boundary (cf. 53:14) and the Omnipotent (al-jabbār), Lord of Might ‘drew close, drew closer still until He was from him the measure of two bows or closer. Then God revealed to him what He wished (53:8-10).’ God revealed to him that which concerns the imposition of the fifty prayers on his community every day and night’.910


The Messenger of God said (re: “Then he revealed to His servant what He revealed [53:10]”): “I saw a great light, before it a veil of rafraf covered with pearls and rubies. Then God revealed to me what He wished to reveal."911


909 Al-Dāraquṭnī, Kitāb al-Ru’ya, 356-7 # 285.
910 Al-Ṭabarî, Jamiʿ al-bayān, 27:45. See also Bhukari, Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al-tawhīd, 37.
The Messenger of God said: “The Night of my یرā’ concluded with me in Heaven. Then I saw my Lord. Between Him and me was a raised (بَذَرَ) veil. And I saw every thing from Him, so that I indeed saw a crown woven from pearls.”۹۱۲

According to these traditions Anas affirmed both the theopaphic reading of sūrat al-
Najm and that the visions there mentioned included a vision of God during the non-
qur’ānic mi’rāj (Ascension) which is here conflated with the qur’ānic یرā’ (horizontal Night
Journey). Traditions [E] and [F] may at first sight seem at odds: did Muḥammad see
God or just a veil? But the “great light” before the veil in report [E] may very well be the
God behind the raised veil of report [F]. Indeed, in a narrative reported by Ibn Sa’d on
the authority of Anas we read:

Then he (Jibrīl) opened the door of heavens for me. I saw the Great Light and there was
before me a curtain, with patterns of pearls and rubies in it. Then Allāh revealed to me
what he willed.۹۱۳

“The Great Light” behind the curtain could be Allāh who revealed to Muḥammad
what he did. If so, this will not be the last time we encounter this motif of a vision of God
described as a vision of a great light.۹۱۴ God’s jalā’, Majesty, we recall, is brilliantly
luminous, i.e. a “great light.”۹۱۵

6.1.4. Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr (d. 692-3)

ʿĀ’isha, daughter of Abū Bakr the first Caliph and beloved wife of the Prophet,
rejected the claim that Muḥammad saw God according to reports. According to the
reports as well she seems to have been isolated with this position, not only in the
community of the Companions generally, but apparently within her own family as well.
We are told that her father Abū Bakr even asked the Prophet if he saw God and got an

۹۱۲ Khaṭṭīb al-Baghdādī, Ta’rīkh Baghdād, 10: 135; Ibn al-Jawzī, Kitāb al-mawdū’āt min al-aḥadīth al-mafī‘āt
(Riyyāḍ: Maktaba Adwā’ al-Salaf, 1997), 1:165; idem, Kitāb Akhbār al-Sīhāt, 184 (Eng.); al-Suyūṭī, al-Ld‘āl‘, 13f.

۹۱۳ Kitāb al-Ţabaqāt al-Kabīr, 1:196.

۹۱۴ See below.

۹۱۵ See above.
affirmative answer. 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr, her nephew and important transmitter of her materials, affirmed the Vision and said her rejection of it was painful for him. Another daughter of the first Caliph, Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr, ‘Ā’isha’s half sister, reportedly narrated Muḥammad’s affirmation of the Vision as well.


I heard the Messenger of God (ص) say while describing the sidrat al-muntahā (Lote-Tree of the Boundary, 53:16): “On it was a covering [frūsh] made of gold and its fruits were few (?), thamarīḥa ka-l-qilāh, its foliage like elephant ears.” Then I (Asmā’) said: “O Messenger of God, what did you see by it?” He said: “I saw my Lord by it.”


(The Prophet said): “I saw my Lord on the Day of ‘Arafa in ‘Arafa upon a red camel. He was wearing two sheets and saying: ‘I have pardoned, I have forgiven, except acts of injustice.”

Asmā’ is here presented, in contrast to ‘Ā’isha’s famous stance, as an advocate of the theophanic reading of sūrat al-Najm and of Muḥammad’s vision of God. Report [B.] seems to have an eschatological setting. As Suliman Bashear has demonstrated, the ‘rider of the [red] camel, rakīb al-ba’ār [ahuwar]’ was one of the titles of the awaited redeemer in Jewish and Christian tradition. Eventually Muslim tradition will appropriate the sign/title as a proof of Muḥammad’s prophecy. According to some Shi‘ī writers it was popular in some Sunnī circles that the rider of the camel was the youthful Allāh. The ninth

916 See Ibn Taymiya, Minhāj al-sunnah al-nabawīye (Cairo, 1964) 2:511. Ibn Taymiya rejects this report as a lie, but he likewise rejects the report of ‘Ā’isha as a lie as well.

917 Ibn Hajar, at-Fath al-Bārī, 8:608.


921 Ibid.

922 See below.
century Imāmī Al-Faḍl b. Shadhān attributed to Abū Hurayra the claim that “Allāh will come on the evening of ‘Arafa on a red camel”. It is likewise reported on the authority of Abū Razīl al-ʿAqil that the Prophet said “I saw my Lord in Mīnā dressed in a jubba (on) an ass-colored camel.”

6.1.5. Umm al-Ṭufayl, wife of ʿUbayy b. Kaʿb (d. 642)


Umm al-Ṭufayl narrates that one day she heard the Messenger of God say that he had seen his Lord, during his sleep, under the most beautiful form, [like] a young man (ṣhabb) with long hair (mawaffar). His two feet in verdure, having on Him sandals of gold, and on His face a veil of gold.

It is not surprising that such a report greatly perturbed those Muslim theologians put off by anthropomorphism. Even some staunch traditionalists (āshāb al-ḥadīth) reportedly rejected this ḥadīth, though on the grounds of isnād criticism rather than theological content. When asked about the narration Ibn Ḥanbal reportedly declared, “This is an unconfirmed hadīth (ḥadīth munkarun). Marwān b. Uthmān and ʿUmarā (b. ʿĀmir) are unknown (majhūs).” On the other hand al-Dāraquṭnī reports in his Kitāb al-Ruʿya from Abū Zurʿa al-Dimashqī concerning this report:

All of these men are known. Their lineage (ansāb) is in Medina. As for Marwān b. Uthmān he is Marwān b. Uthmān b. Abī Saʿd al-Muʿallā al-Anṣārī. As for ʿUmarā he is Ibn ʿĀmir b. ʿAmr b. Ḥajān, Companion of the Messenger of God. And ʿUmarā (sic) b. al-Ḥārith and Saʿdī b. Abī Hilāl. There is no doubt in it.
Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Suyūṭī considered this report invented (mawā'ū). Ibn al-Jawzī suggests that it was invented by Nu‘aym b. Hammād (d. 843) who, he claims, falsely attributed the report to ‘Abd Allāh b. Wahb (d. 813) whom he follows in the isnād. On the other hand al-Suyūṭī reports that “a group reported it from Ibn Wahb,” including Yaḥyā b. Sulaymān, Rawḥ b. al-Faraj, Yaḥyā b. Bukayr, Aḥmad b. Rashīdīn, and ‘Abd Allāh b. Saḥīh. If criticisms of the ḥadīth of Umm al-Ṭufayl were readily available, support for the report came from renowned scholars. Al-Suyūṭī describes Nu‘aym b. Hammād as one of the eminent Imāms (al-a‘imma al-dā‘ām) and the first to compile a Musnad. Al-Bukhārī, Abū Dāwud, al-Tirmidhī, and Ibn Mājah reported from him. ‘Abd Allāh b. Wahb (d. 813) is the famed Mālikī muḥaddith who introduced traditions into Egypt. Al-Ṭabarānī, Ibn Abī ‘Āsim, and Al-Lālīkāi reported the ḥadīth in their collections. Abu al-Ḥasan b. Bashshār (d. 925) declared it ṣaḥīh and al-As'ār counted it a ri‘ya ḥaqīqa (true vision).

6.1.6. Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. 652)

Abū Dharr shows the most renowned Doppelgesicht in this controversy. Did he affirm or deny the Vision? If he affirmed it did he affirm a ri‘ya bi ‘l-qalb or a ri‘ya bi ‘l-baṣar? His most famous statement on the matter could be read as an affirmation or a denial. Taking the reports together rather than in isolation may, however, bring some clarity to Abū Dharr’s position, at least as found in the literature.

930 Al-Suyūṭī, Al-La‘āli‘, 29.
931 Al-Suyūṭī, Al-La‘āli‘, 28.
934 Ibn Abī Ya‘la, Taqqāt, 2:59.
[A.] Yazíd b. Ibrāhīm < Qatāda < Abū Allāh b. Shaqīq < Abū Dharr:

Abū Allāh b. Shaqīq narrates: I said to Abū Dharr: If I had met the Prophet I would have asked him a question.
-What question? (asked Abū Dharr)
-I would have asked him whether he had seen God.
-Abū Dharr replied: But this is exactly what I asked him.
-And what did he say?
-Light! How could I have seen Him? [or: Light! Indeed I saw.]\textsuperscript{937}

In a variant of this tradition reported by Mu‘adh b. Hishām the Prophet responds to Abū Dharr’s question, “Did you see your Lord?,” simply with: \textit{ra‘aytu nūran}, “I saw Light.”\textsuperscript{938} What is the relation of this light to God? Is this an affirmation or a denial of \textit{Ru‘ya}? The crux of this report is the Arabic of the last line. As Ibn Khuzayma noted: “(the hadith) is reported with a wording \textit{(lafz)} that carries both a denial and an affirmation according to the range of the Arabic language.”\textsuperscript{939} It could be read either as \textit{nūr as annā arāhu} or as \textit{nūr innī arāhu}. If the first word \textit{(nūr)} ends with \textit{tawwān} and the second \textit{(in)} has \textit{fatha} \textit{’l-hamza} with \textit{tashdīd} \textit{al-nūn} and \textit{fatha}, thus read as \textit{annā}, the sentence could be read as a denial, i.e. “How \textit{(annā)} could I have seen Him [the light obstructed my vision].” Or as al-Qurṭubi paraphrases it: “The light overwhelmed me \textit{(ghalabnī)} and dazzled my eyes \textit{(baḥarannī)} preventing me from seeing Him.”\textsuperscript{940} The light is thus a “prohibitive light,” \textit{al-nūr al-mā‘ū}. It would thus be the light that serves as a veil. Abū Mūsā reported from the Prophet: “His veil is light.”\textsuperscript{941} The Tābi‘ Abū al-‘Alīya reported also: “The Messenger of God was asked, ‘Did you see your Lord?’ and he answered: ‘I saw a river, and across the river I saw a veil; beyond the veil I saw light. I didn’t see other than that.’”\textsuperscript{942} Even though the light is sub-velar this last line suggests that he did not see God. But Abū al-‘Alīya is also on record interpreting \textit{sūrat al-}


\textsuperscript{938} Al-Nawawī, \textit{Sharh Sahih Muslim}, 2:15.

\textsuperscript{939} Ibn Khuzayma, \textit{Istāb al-taḥādīd}, 207.

\textsuperscript{940} Al-Qurṭubi, \textit{al-Jāmi‘ li-‘akhbār al-Qur‘ān} 17:93.

\textsuperscript{941} Muslim, \textit{Sahih}, \textit{imān}, #343.

Najm [53]: 11 (“His heart lied not concerning what he saw”) as meaning: “Muḥammad saw Him with his heart, he didn’t see Him with his eyes.”\textsuperscript{943} Is this famed Tābi‘ showing a Doppelgesicht here? Maybe not.

If the sentence is read with fatḥa ‘l-rā‘ (nūra) and kasra al-nūn with tashdīd al-nūn (innī), as found in Ibn Ḥanbal’s Musnad,\textsuperscript{944} the line then reads: “Light, indeed I saw Him.”\textsuperscript{945} Qārī al-Harawī explains:

Nūr, i.e. He is a great light, and the intent (of this expression) is that He is the Light of lights. Thus His statement, “Allāh is the light of the heavens and the earth (24:35),” i.e. he illuminates the two.\textsuperscript{946}

On this reading the light was not a prohibitive light; it was God’s own luminosity. Thus, in another hadith Qatāda reports that, after Ibn Shaqiq said to Abū Dharr: ‘If I saw the Prophet I would have asked him did he see his Lord,’ Abū Dharr replied: ‘I asked him and he said, ‘I saw Him.’”\textsuperscript{947} Al-Nasā‘ī likewise reported from Abū Dharr: “The Messenger of Allāh saw his Lord with his heart; he didn’t see him with his eyes.”\textsuperscript{948} According to al-Qurtubi the meaning of Abū Dharr’s statement that “The Messenger of Allāh saw his Lord with his heart” is that “Allāh placed (Muḥammad’s) eyes in his heart until he saw his Lord Most High and Allāh made that a (true) vision (ru‘ya).”\textsuperscript{949}

Josef van Ess says of this difficult line from the report [A.] of Abū Dharr:

The last sentence is somewhat difficult to interpret, and variants do exist. But the intention of the story is clear. Light has no form: thus, God does not assume any shape (ṣūra), and the vision is reduced to a sort of bedazzlement.\textsuperscript{950}

\textsuperscript{943} Al-Suyūṭī, Tafsīr al-Durr al-manṭḥār, 7: 648.


\textsuperscript{945} The line could also be read with faṭrī al-ra‘a‘ and kasra al-nūn with tashdīd al-yā‘. See the discussion in al-Nawawī, Shāh Suḥūḥ Muslim, 2:16; Qārī al-Harawī, Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ, 9:625.

\textsuperscript{946} Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ, 9:625.

\textsuperscript{947} ’Abd Allāh, Kitāb al-Sunnah, 1: 290.


\textsuperscript{950} Flowering of Muslim Theology, 62; idem, “Le MIRÅG et la Vision de Dieu,” 41; “Muhammad’s Ascension,” 12.
This is not at all clear nor is it likely. According to Hishām b. Sālim al-Jawāliqī (fl. eighth century) God possesses a human form made out of a radiant light with a white glow.\textsuperscript{951} The Ḥanbālī jurist and theologian Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥāmid al-Warrāq (d. 1013) even quoted a tradition from Ibn ‘Abbās according to which the Prophet saw God during his Night Journey in the form of a young man of “twinkling light, nūr yatāla‘la‘u.”\textsuperscript{952} However much the Shi‘ite ghulūn (Hishām) exceeds the bounds of acceptable Shi‘ite dogma on other matters,\textsuperscript{953} or however excessive Ibn Ḥāmid’s anthropomorphism was found to later Ḥanbalī mutakallamūn like Ibn al-Jawzī, they both stand firmly within biblical, qur‘ānic and Sunnī tradition with this anthropomorphic luminosity, as we have demonstrated above.\textsuperscript{954}

Along with these six Companions cited above, Muḥammad’s Vision is reported on the authority of 13 others (plus some anonymous Companions\textsuperscript{955}), making a total of nineteen (+) Sahāba who affirmed the Prophet’s seeing God in one form or another: Mu‘adh b. Jabal,\textsuperscript{956} Jābir b. Samu‘a,\textsuperscript{957} Abū Umāma,\textsuperscript{958} Abū ‘Ubayda b. al-Jarrāh,\textsuperscript{959}

\textsuperscript{951} Al-Ash‘a‘rī. Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn (ed. Helmut Ritter; Istanbul, 1929-33) 34.

\textsuperscript{952} Ibn al-Jawzī, Daf Shubah al-tashbīḥ, 31.


\textsuperscript{954} Van Ess claims TG 4:386 „Sunnitische Belege sind ohnehin nicht ganz so häufig.“ As evidence of this marginal Sunnī tradition van Ess cites a statement by Qatada, the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik and a single „aberrante“ hadith according to which God created angels from the light of his arms and breast. But as we have shown above this motif of divine luminosity is attested in a relatively large number of non-Ṣūfī Sunnī sources.


\textsuperscript{956} Hadīth aḥsan sūra. See above n. 813.

\textsuperscript{957} Hadīth aḥsan sūra. See above n. 814.
'Abd al-Rahmān b. 'Ā'ish, Thawbān, mawla rasūli llah, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, Abū Ra'fī, 'Abd al-Rahman b. Sābit, Abu al-Darda', Muʿadh b. 'Afrā', Ka'b al-Ahbarī and Abū Razīl al-Aqīfī. By conspicuous contrast only two companions are on record explicitly denying the Vision: 'Ā'isha and Ibn Masʿūd. These two, however, show a Doppelgesicht.

6.1.7. 'Abd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d. 652)

Reputedly the sixth convert to Islam after Muhammad began preaching in Mecca and one of the closest of the Prophet's companions Ibn Masʿūd is one of four persons Muhammad reportedly instructed Muslims to learn Qurʾān from. His position on

958 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 817.
959 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 818.
960 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 819.
961 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 820.
962 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 821.
963 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 822.
964 Hadith ahsan ǧūra. See above n. 823.
966 Sufyān b. Ziyād < his paternal uncle Sulaym b. Ziyād < Ibn Muʿadh < his father Muʿadh b. 'Afrā'. Sulaym b. Ziyād narrates: "[As I was coming out of the mosque of the Messenger of God.] I met Ikrima, Ibn 'Abbās' freed slave, who said [to me]: 'Wait, I must have you hear what this man said!' This man, he was a son of Muʿadh b. 'Afrā'. Ikrima said [to him]: 'Tell me [again] then what your father said to you of what the Messenger of God said!' [The man] answered: 'My father told me that the Messenger of God had told him that he had seen the Lord of the worlds in an enclosure of Paradise [Jerusalem?], under the form of a young man, [wearing a crown] and with a twinkling glance.' Sufyān b. Ziyād said: "Later, I myself met Ikrima, and I questioned him [about] this report. He answered me: 'Yes it is well that he said that to me, except that he said that [the Prophet] had seen this by his heart (bi-fuʿādā)'." Ibn Furak, Musākil al-hadīth, 387; al-Suyūṭī, al-Ladā'iḥ, 30; al-Muttaqī, Kanz al-ʿummāl, 1:58 (the latter two quoting al-Ṭabarānī, Kīṭāb al-sunan).
968 See above n. 915.
969 Al-Bukhārī, Saḥīh, Volume 5, Book 58 # 150; Narrated 'Abd Allāh b. 'Amr: "I heard the Prophet saying, 'Learn the recitation of Qurʾān from four persons: 'Abd Allāh b. Masʿūd, Salm, the freed slave of Abū Hudhaifa, Ubayy b. Ka'b and Muʿadh b. Jabal."
Muhammad’s Vision is unclear, however. See for example the synopsis of Qaḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 1149) as quoted by al-Nawawī (d. 1278):

The Pious Ancestors (al-Salaf) and the Successors (al-Khalaf) disagree: did the Prophet (s) see his Lord during his Night Journey? ‘Ā’ishah, may Allāh be pleased with her, denied it...and the likes (of this denial) comes (also) on the authority of Abū Hurayra and a group (of others), and it is well-known (al-maghrūr) from Ibn Mas’ūd and a group of hadīth scholars and theologians went this way (as well). (On the other hand) it is reported on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, may Allāh be pleased with him, that he did see Him with his eyes, and the likes (of this affirmation) is reported on the authority of Abū Dharr and Ka‘b – may Allāh be pleased with them – and al-Hasan (al-Baṣrī), may Allāh have mercy on him, used to swear on that. And its like is also related about Ibn Mas’ūd and Abū Hurayra...970

Did this famed Companion deny or affirm the Vision? Like Abū Hurayra, Ibn Mas’ūd’s Doppelgesicht seems to be only apparent.

[A.] Hammād b. Salama < ‘Āṣam < Zīr b. Ḥubaysh < Ibn Mas’ūd:

Re: “he indeed saw him at another descent, by the Lote-tree of the boundary (53:13-14)”: The Prophet (s) said: “I saw Jibrīl by the lote-tree of the boundary with six hundred wings on him shaking off a plume (?, yanfūdu min rīsha) of ornamental flourishes (al-tahāwīl), pearls and cornundum (al-yāqūl).”971

The “well-known (al-maghrūr)” position of Ibn Mas’ūd cited above by Qaḍī ‘Iyāḍ is actually not a categorical denial of rū‘ya but an angelophanic interpretation of sūrat al-Najm. According to Ibn Mas’ūd the two visions alluded to in these verses were of Jibrīl in his heavenly form with six-hundred wings. 972 Al-Nasā’ī reports Ibn Mas’ūd’s interpretation of 53:13 as: “The Prophet of God saw Jibrīl on a rafṣa, filling the space between heaven and earth. He did not see his Lord, Blessed and Most High.”973 As should be clear now, such a position is not tantamount to denying a Vision of God. This denial contextually only applies to the visions of sūrat al-Najm and therefore may not be a

970 Al-Nawawī, Shahr Sahih Muslim, 2:9.


973 Al-Nasā‘ī, Sunan, 10:277 #11477. This is quoted by Ibn Ḥajar, al-Fath al-Bārī, 8:609.
categorical denial of ru'ya. Other reports strengthen this suggestion.

[B.] 'Uthmān b. 'Amr < Sulaymāb b. 'Ubayda < Ḍahāk b. Muzāḥim < Ibn Mas'ūd:

The Messenger of God (ṣ) reported to (Ibn Mas'ūd) about his Lord, may He be Exalted and Great. He (God) said: “I presented to Abraham my Friendship, I spoke to Moses directly and I granted Muḥammad al-Kifāh.” A man from the people said, “What is al-Kifāh?” (Ibn Mas'ūd) said: “O Glory to God! Al-Kifāh is unknown to an Arab? Al-Kifāh is al-Mushāfah, speaking mouth to mouth.” 'Uthmān b. 'Amr said: “I asked Yūnus al-Nahwī about al-Kifāh and he said, ‘i.e. ʿawāḥa muwāḥa, face to face encounter’.”

This is clearly a variant of the report listing the “tripartite schema of increasing intimacy,” as van Ess describes it: Abraham was taken as God’s friend, Moses spoke to God directly, and Muḥammad saw God. Al-Kifāh replaces, and apparently includes, al-Ru’ya in this report. We are told here that Al-Kifāh is al-Mushāfah, speaking mouth to mouth and ʿawāḥa muwāḥa, face to face encounter. This is no doubt why al-Dāraquṭnī cites it in his Kitāb al-Ru’ya. Likewise, while discussing the fact that “most of the scholars” are of the opinion that Muḥammad saw his Lord during his Night Journey, al-Ālūsī points out in his Rūh al-maʿāni fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿazīm that it is ascribed to Ibn Masʿūd and others that God spoke to the prophet with no intermediary (bi-ghayr waṣīta).

Although God spoke directly to Moses, he did so only from behind a veil. To Muḥammad, on the other hand, God spoke directly with no veil obstructing his vision.

Although I (God) spoke to Moses, I did so from behind a veil on [Mount] Sinai. But I spoke to you [Muḥammad] on a carpet of nearness (biṣāṭ al-qurb) with no veil.

It is therefore possible that Ibn Masʿūd’s Doppelgesicht is artificial. The reports attributed to him do not necessarily suggest that he denied the Vision categorically. They might suggest only that he interpreted surat al-Najm angelophanically and that he affirmed some visionary encounter with God on some other occasion.

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974 Al-Dāraquṭnī, Kitāb al-Ru’ya, 279-80 # 168, 169.
975 Flowering of Muslim theology, 16.
976 See above.
977 Al-Ālūsī, Rūḥ al-maʿāni, 25:56.
6.1.8. ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr (d. 678)


(Masrūq said): “I was sitting back in ‘Ā’isha’s house when she said: ‘O Abū ‘Ā’isha, there are three things, whoever says any of which, he is lying about Allāh in the most hateful manner.’ I asked: ‘Which things?’ She said: ‘[First,] whoever tells you that Muḥammad saw his Lord, he is lying about Allāh in the most hateful manner.’ I was sitting back, so I sat up and said: ‘O Mother of the Faithful! Give me a moment and do not rush me. Did not Allāh Almighty say “Surely he beheld him on the clear horizon (81:23)”?’ She replied: ‘I was the first in the entire community to have asked Allāh’s Messenger about this, and he said: ‘It is but Jibrīl, I did not see him in the actual form in which he was created other than these two times. I saw him alighting from heaven, covering it all. The magnitude of his frame spares what lies between the heaven and the earth”.’ Then she said: ‘Did you not hear Allāh say: “Vision comprehends Him not, but He comprehends all vision. He is the Subtle, the Aware (6:103)”?’ Did you not hear Allāh say: “And it is not (vouchsafed) to any mortal that Allāh should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a veil, or (that) He sends a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave. Lo! He is Exalted, Wise (42:51)”?’ She continued: ‘[Second,] whoever claims that Allāh’s Messenger concealed any part of Allāh’s Book, he is lying about Allāh in the most hateful manner when Allāh is saying: “O Messenger, make known that which has been revealed unto you from your Lord, for if you do it not, you will not have conveyed His Message (5:67)”’. She continued: ‘[Third,] whoever claims that he can tell what shall happen tomorrow, he is lying about Allāh in the most hateful manner, since Allah is saying: “Say: None in the heavens and the earth knoweth the Unseen save Allāh [and they know not when they will be raised again (27:65)]”.’

[B.] Ismā’īl (b. Ibrāhīm) < ‘Āmir (b. Sharāḥīl al-Sha’bī) < Masrūq:

Masrūq said: “I went to ‘Ā’isha and said, ‘Did Muḥammad see his Lord?’ She answered, ‘Thou hast said something that makes my hair stand on end.’ I said, ‘Be easy.’ Then I recited the words ‘He certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord (53:18).’ She said, ‘Wherever are the words carrying you? It was only Jibrīl. Whoever claims that Muḥammad saw his Lord, or concealed anything of what he was commanded, or knew the five things which God Most High, that with Him is knowledge of the Hour of the Resurrection and that he sends down the rain and the rest, utters against God an enormous lie.”


[C.] 'Abd Allāh b. Lahī'a < Abū al-Aswad Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān < Urwa b. al-Zubayr < 'Ā'isha:

I was the first to ask the Messenger of God (ﷺ) if he saw Jibrīl while asleep in 'Ayyād. Then he went to complete his thing (?; ḥāyāh) and Jibrīl called to him, “O Muḥammad, O Muḥammad.” (Muḥammad) looked right and left three times but saw nothing. Then he raised his head and lo! There he was on the sky’s horizon, one leg folded over the other. Then he said: “O Muḥammad, (I am) Jibrīl, (I am) Jibrīl” He calmed (the Prophet) then the Prophet (ﷺ) fled, until he came upon the people. Then he looked and saw nothing. He left from the people and looked and he saw him. Thus that is (the meaning) of God’s words, “By the star when it sets. Your companion errs not nor does he deviate” to his statement “then he descended and hung suspended (53:1-8),” meaning Jibrīl to Muḥammad.981


Masrūq said: “I asked ‘Ā’isha (r) about God’s statement, May He be Exalted and Great, ‘He indeed saw him at another descent (53:23)’ (and) ‘He indeed saw him on the clear horizon (81:23).’ She said: ‘I was the first of this Ummah to ask the Messenger of God (ﷺ) this and he said, “Jibrīl, I saw him twice: I saw him on the highest horizon (al-'uṣūr al-dārū) and I saw him on the clear horizon (al-'uṣūr al-mubīn)’.”982

The Mother of the Faithful thus passionately rejects in the strongest language the claim that Muḥammad saw God. Those who make this claim are even accused of telling great lies against God! It is often pointed out in the Vision-affirming Sunnī circles that the basis of ‘Ā’isha’s rejection seems not to be an express denial of the Prophet but rather an angelicophic interpretation of sūrat al-Najm on the authority of the Prophet,983 as well as an interpretation of sūrat al-An‘ām [6]:103.984 If Ibn ‘Abbās is the authority for the theophanic interpretation of sūrat al-Najm, ‘Ā’isha is the authority for the angelicophic interpretation.

According to van Ess “(‘Ā’isha’s) commentaries are mingled with polemical remarks against certain (later) Shi‘ite currents and are therefore apocryphal, or have at least been reformulated.”985 This is apparent.986 But this denial is probably reformulated rather than

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981 See above n. 753.
982 al-Bayḥaqī, al-Aṣma’ wa al-Ṣifāṭ, 2:351 #924.
983 However cf. below n. 986.
984 See below.
985 Van Ess, Flowering of Muslim Theology, 72.
986 While enumerating the “enormous lies” ‘Ā’isha mentions those who claim that Muḥammad “concealed anything of what he was commanded.” The idea that the Prophet concealed portions of the revelation,
fabricated. 'Ā'isha's nephew the famed muhaddith and Tābi'ī Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 713), who affirmed the Vision, said it was difficult for him whenever his aunt's denial was mentioned to him.\textsuperscript{987} Nevertheless, the Mother of the Faithful does show a 'double-face' in the sources.

[E.] Muḥammad b. 'Umar < Ma'mar b. Rāshid < al-Zahrawī < 'Urwa < 'Ā'isha:

The beginning of revelations to the Apostle of Allah, may Allah be pleased with him, was in the form of true dreams. He did not dream but it came to him like daybreak. She said: He remained in this condition as long as Allah willed. Solitude was liked by him; nothing was dearer to him. He would retire to the cave of Hira' taking provisions for several nights, after which he would return to his family. Then he would come to Khādījā to take provisions again until al-Haqq came to him while he was in the cave of Hira'.\textsuperscript{988}

This is the Call-report fragment as found in Ibn Sa'rī's Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr. Al-Haqq is of course a name God. Its usage here, according to Watt, supports the view that Muḥammad originally took the visions of sūrat al-Najm as visions of God.\textsuperscript{989} In this fragment as found later integrated into the canonical Call-account 'Ā'isha is made to say something more:

The beginning of revelations to the Apostle of Allah, may Allah be pleased with him, was in the form of true visions during sleep, which came to him like daylight. Then the love of seclusion was bestowed on him. He used to go in seclusion in the cave of Hira' where he

\textsuperscript{987} Ibn Hajar, al-Fath al-Bārī, 8:608.

\textsuperscript{988} Translation modified from Haq and Ghazanfar, Ibn Sa'rī's Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr, 1: 224.

\textsuperscript{989} Al-Ṭabarī, History 67 n. 96 comments by Watt. Also Watt, Muhammad at Mecca, 40. See also above.
used to worship (Allah alone) continuously for many days before his desire to see his
family. He used to take with him the journey food for the stay and then come back to
Khadjja to take his likewise again till suddenly al-Haqq came to him while he was in the
cave of Hira'. The angel came to him and asked him to read. The Prophet replied, "I do not
know how to read."  

"Al-Haqq came to him" is now qualified by "the angel came to him." This might suggest a
Jibrilian redaction of a report attributed to 'Ā'ishā that seems to have originally spoke
only of God.  


The Prophet saw his Lord under the form of a young man seated on a footstool, his foot
in verdure [made] of (?) twinkling light [fī khudra'īn min nūrin yatala'lla'īn].

I have only found this report quoted by al-Suyūtī (d. 1505) in his al-La'āli' al-maṣnū'a fi
al-aḥādīth al-mawdu'a, who quotes it from al-Ṭabarānī's (d. 971) Kitāb al-sunna.

In as much as Safwān b. Sula'yam died c. 750 and 'Ā'ishā in 678, this isnād would
understandably be considered "weak." However, G.H.A. Juynboll, in his Muslim
Tradition, has argued that, though the isnād attached to reports may indeed be
fabrications, as a whole the reports give an accurate picture of the theological situation at
the time. Could it be that this nasta still reflects a position 'Ā'ishā held or was thought to
have actually held? What an extreme example of a Doppelgesicht! Or is it? Daniel Gimaret
considered this in his discussion of this report and opined:

Mais il n’y a pas nécessairement contradiction. Peut-être a-t-elle voulu dire que
Muhammad n’a jamais vu pour de bon Dieu ici-bas, sans exclure la possibilité qu’il L’ait vu
en rêve, comme c’est dit dans le hadith d’Umm at-Ṭufayl.

\[990\] Al-Bukhārī, Sahih, 1:2, kitāb al-walā'ī # 3.

\[991\] See above.

\[992\] On this difficult phrase see Gimaret, Dieu à l’image de l’homme, 161.

\[993\] Al-Suyūtī, al-La’āli’, 30.

\[994\] Ibid.


\[996\] Dieu à l’image de l’homme, 161 n. 4: "But there isn’t necessarily a contradiction here. Perhaps she meant
that Muhammad never really saw God here below, without excluding the possibility that he had seen Him in
a dream, as it is stated in the hadith of Umm at-Ṭufayl?"
I am not convinced. Nevertheless, such is indeed the harmonizing approach taken by later hadith scholars, as we show below.

6.2. Islam’s Youthful Deity and its History-of-Religions Background

Unlike the biblical, and for that matter Qur’anic, theophany tradition which lacks all descriptive detail of the divine Erscheinungsform, the Islamic theophany tradition as found in these reports is similar to the ANE/Mediterranean and Rabbinc (see below) traditions in that it is rather generous with the descriptive details. How are we to understand this image of Islam’s youthful deity? Even though young gods are found in various religious/mythological traditions, it is my opinion that a particular ancient Semitic and esoteric Jewish tradition may help us contextualize this remarkable Islamic image.

This divine youth plays an important role in the Jewish esoteric/mystical tradition called ma’asah merkabah or the “Work of the Divine Chariot-Throne,” in particular in texts (Heikhalot, s. heikal “palace”) concerned with descriptions of journeys through the seven celestial palaces culminating in a vision of the divine merkabah and its divine occupant,997 as well as texts (Shi’ur Qomah, “Measure of the [Divine] Body) concerned with graphically enumerating the astronomical measurements of the limbs and body parts as well as their secret names of the anthropomorphic creator-god.998 According to an important study by


Christopher Morray-Jones, the Shi'ur Qomah tradition originally concerned the measurements of two divine figures: (1) the Yosef Bere'ehah, “creator of the beginning,” who is identical with the divine kabod or Glory of the Holy One (God) and (2) a divine messianic ‘youth (na'ar),’ sometimes in these sources identified with the supreme angel Metatron.999 This divine youth is highly exalted, on the surface indistinguishable from God himself. One text says of him:

And see the Youth, who goes forth to meet you from behind the throne of glory. Do not worship him, for his crown is like the crown of his King, the sandals on his feet are like the sandals of his King, the garment on him is like the garment of his King, and a garment of stone is girded on his loins. The sun is poured from the belt in front of him and the moon from the knots behind him. His eyes kindle like torches, and his eyeballs kindle like lamps. His splendor is like the splendor of his King, and his adornment like the adornment of his Creator.1000

The crown, sandals, and garment remind us of the same accessories worn by Islam’s divine youth (shābb).1001 Like the Islamic shābb the Hebrew na'ar is beautiful: a number of his names (e.g. Yothiel, “the Beauty of God”) attest to it.1002 But here the na'ar is distinguished from God, even though his attire and splendor are like God’s. The question of the na'ar’s relation to God is not easy to answer. In the above passage the perspective traveler is warned not to worship the Youth. In other texts, however, he is the object of veneration. As an object of measuring in Shi'ur Qomah texts he is, as Morray-Jones shows


1000 Quote from a Heikhalot text, which Halperin (Faces of the Chariot, 368) has dubbed the Ozhayah text after the name of the angel-narrator who gives the reader instructions on how to carry out successfully the journey to the Merkabah. Translation from James R. Davila, “Melchizedek, the ‘Youth,’ and Jesus,” in James R. Davila (ed.), The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity. Papers From an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001 (STD) 46; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 255 [art. =248-274].

1001 See e.g. the reports from Anas b. Malik [F.] and Umm al-Tufayl above.

1002 Halperin, Faces of the Chariot, 425.
us, an object of praise. In the twenty-second chapter of 2 Enoch (Vienna Codex) God instructs his glorious ones to bow down before the Youth and in two Heikhalot texts the angelic hosts are pictured prostrate before the Youth in the presence of God while the na'ar inserts the fire of deafness into their ears. Indeed, the na'ar of the Heikhalot texts seems to be “in some sense an embodiment of the Divine Glory” and “a manifestation of God.” He is identified with the presence (pan'im) of God of Exod. 33:15 and the mal'ak of Exod. 23:21, in whom dwelled the Name of God: he thus had the nature of God in him. He shares God’s Name. The revelation of the enigmatic divine name in Exod. 3:14, 'šye(h) 'ăšer 'šye(h) (? “I Am That I Am”) seems to be understood in this tradition as naming both God and the Youth: the first 'šye(h) referring to God, the second to the divine na'ar.

The Youth thus manifests and mediates the Glory of the Holy One, with Whom he is partly similar and partly dissimilar, since the “I AM THAT I AM” relationship between the two is expressive of both identity and difference.

The divine youth and his relation to God was the source of great anxiety and debate in Jewish circles during the first centuries of the common era and maybe before. As Daniel Boyarin has shown, binitarianism (i.e. belief in “two powers” in heaven) was


1006 Halperin, Faces of the Chariot, 258.

1007 See sources and discussion in ibid.


widespread in the thought-world of first and even second century Judaism(s).\textsuperscript{1010} The later rabbinic polemics against this Jewish binitarianism makes it clear that the ‘two powers’ posited were generally God depicted as an old man – the ‘\textit{attāq yāmīn} or ‘Ancient of Days’ of Dan. 7:9 – and this divine messianic youth, associated with the ‘one like a son of man’ also from Dan. 7.9.\textsuperscript{1011} The controversy revolved around the young god’s relation to the old. The ‘orthodox’ rabbinic position in this controversy is most instructive.

Then God (\textit{’elohīm}) said: “\textit{I am YHWH your God (’elohīm) (Ex. 20:2)}”: Why is this said? Because at the (Red) Sea He revealed Himself as a young man making war, as it is said, “\textit{YHWH is a man of war} (Ex. 15:3).”

At Sinai He revealed Himself as an old man full of mercy, as it is said, “\textit{And they saw the God (’elohīm) of Israel}” etc (Ex. 24:10 f.)…

And it says, “\textit{I beheld till the thrones (plural) were placed, and One that was ancient of days (’attāq yāmīn) did sit}” (Dan. 7:9); but it says, “\textit{a fiery stream issued and came forth from Him (singular)}” (Dan. 7:10).

Now, in order to give no opening to the nations of the world to say, “\textit{There are ‘two powers,’}” Scripture reads, “\textit{I am YHWH your ’elohīm.”}

\[
\text{I was in Egypt,} \\
\text{I was at the Sea} \\
\text{I was in the past, I will be in the Age to come} \\
\text{I am in this world, I am in the World to Come.}\textsuperscript{1012}
\]

As has been pointed out by Alan Segal, this midrash and others like it reveal that the ‘heretics’ here polemicized against held that there were two divine beings based on the physical descriptions as well as distribution of divine names in the biblical texts.\textsuperscript{1013} The presumably old god at Sirai, who shows mercy to Israel by not making them ‘victims of the theophany,’ is called \textit{’elohīm} in Exod. 24:10. On the other hand, the young “man of


\textsuperscript{1011} Segal, \textit{Two Powers in Heaven}, Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{1012} Mekhila d’Rabbi Ishmael, fourth-century. See Segal, \textit{Two Powers in Heaven}, 33-34.

war” who justly slew the Egyptians at the Red Sea is *ywhw*. Some Jewish and Samaritan exegetes took them both as different divine powers, something like:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Elohim</em></th>
<th><em>Yahweh</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old, gray-haired man</td>
<td>Young, black-haired man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merciful teacher</td>
<td>Just warrior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Sinai</td>
<td>Red Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primordial God</td>
<td>Eschatological God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rabbis on the other hand, while acknowledging these two distinct manifestations, affirm that they were two manifestations of the one God, not ‘two powers’ with independent wills. In other rabbincic texts we are specifically given to believe that the primordial old god *transforms into* the eschatological young god. This motif does not seem to be an innovation of the rabbis. In 1960 Julian Morgenstern found evidence of a West Semitic tradition according to which an aged, father-god dies and is buried, only to be reborn later as a young son-god. The old and young deities, Morgenstern tells us,

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1014 On the Samaritan evidence see Fossum, *Name of God*, 226-228.

1015 The attribution of black hair derives from Cant. 5:11 where the Beloved, identified as God, is described as a young man whose “locks are curled and black as a raven.” On the apparent, but not real, contradiction between this description of God as a young man with curly black hair and the description in Dan. 7:9 of God as an old man with white hair see b. Hag 14a.

1016 The affirmation that closes the midrash, “I was in Egypt, I was at the Sea; I was in the past, I will be in the Age to come; I am in this world, I am in the World to Come,” suggests that the ‘heretics’ attributed temporal significance to the ‘two powers’ as well: the old god, i.e. the Creator, versus the future, eschatological god who is called ‘youth’ because he is a “Johny-come-lately among the celestial beings,” to use Halperin’s words (*Faces of the Chariot*, 421). In 3 Enoch 4:10 it is explained that he “is a youth among them in days and months and years and that is why they call me ‘youth’.” 3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch, ed. and tr. Hugo Odeberg (Cambridge: The University press, 1928) 13. The name of God ‘*yehye(h)* ’der ‘*yehye(h)* (? “I Am That I Am”), that signified the two powers in later *Heikhalot* tradition and the old and young manifestations of God in rabbincic, was also read by the latter as possessing past and future significance as well. See Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 37.

1017 On the significance of the complementary wills of the two manifestations according to the rabbis in contrast to the dualism of the Gnostics see also Alan F. Segal, “Dualism in Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism: A Definitive Issue,” in idem, *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 1-40.


are but two complementary forms of the divine being. For the rabbis, these biblical passages "emphasized that the Israelites would have to recognize God in different forms throughout their history." We will encounter this need to be able to recognize God in varying theophanic forms again when we return to Islam's youthful deity.

Several rabbinic texts give us a more detailed picture of God in his youthful manifestation at the Sea. See for example *Exodus Rabbah* 23:8:

Rabbi Judah says: "Who spoke the praise of God? The (male) children whom Pharaoh had sought to cast into the Nile—they are the ones who recognized God. How is this? When Israel were in Egypt and an Israelite woman felt that she was about to give birth, she would go out to the fields and have her children there. After she given birth, she would leave the infant there, saying to God: 'Lord of the Worlds! I have done mine, now You do yours!'"

Rabbi Yehanan said: "God [in His Glory] would immediately come down to cut the umbilical cord and to wash the infant...He would place two stones in the child's hand. From one he could suckle oil, and from the other honey...and so the children would grow up in the fields...When they were asked: 'Who took care of you?,' they replied: 'A certain beautiful and praiseworthy young man came down and took care of all our needs,' as is written: 'My beloved is fair and ruddy, a paragon among ten thousands'" (Cant. 5:10).

When Israel reached the Sea, those same children were among them. They saw God at the Sea, and said to their parents: "This is the one who did all those things for us when we were in Egypt!" Thus, Scripture says: "This is my God and I will glory Him!" (Ex. 15:2).

As Arthur Green has pointed out in his discussion of this and related narratives, the crossing at the Sea is here made "the moment of a great visionary experience." God is seen in his beautiful young man Erscheinungsform. Important for our discussion also is the emphasis placed on the recognition of God by the abandoned children: "they are the ones who recognized God" it is stressed. The implication seems to be that the other Israelites

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1021 Segal, "Dualism in Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism," 5.


1023 Ibid., 453.
at the Sea did not recognize him. But the boys who were with God in the fields of Egypt were the ones who recognized him at the Sea and thus sung his praise.

Can any of this help us understand Islam’s youthful deity? Even though we really only hear of Allah’s youthful Erscheinungform in the literature, apparently this was only one of at least two such theophanic forms. It seems also to have been his eschatological Erscheinungform, distinguished from his primordial form. See, for example, a report found in al-Bukhari, Muslim, and Ibn Hanbal.

Zayd b. Aslam < ‘Aṭa’ b. Yasaʾr < Abū Sa’id al-Khudrī:

We said, “O Allah’s Apostle! Shall we see our Lord on the Day of Resurrection?” He said, “Do you have any difficulty in seeing the sun and the moon when the sky is clear?” We said, “No.” He said, “So you will have no difficulty in seeing your Lord on that Day as you have no difficulty in seeing the sun and the moon (in a clear sky).” The Prophet then said, “Somebody will then announce, ‘Let every nation follow what they used to worship.’ So the companions of the cross will go with their cross, and the idolaters (will go) with their idols, and the companions of every god (false deities) (will go) with their gods, till there remain those who used to worship Allah, both the obedient ones and the mischievous ones, and some of the people of the Scripture. Then Hell will be presented to them as if it were a mirage.

Then it will be said to the Jews, ‘What did you use to worship?’ They will reply, ‘We used to worship Ezra, the son of Allah.’ It will be said to them, ‘You are liars, for Allah has neither a wife nor a son. What do you want (now)?’ They will reply, ‘We want You to provide us with water.’ Then it will be said to them ‘Drink,’ and they will fall down in Hell (instead). Then it will be said to the Christians, ‘What did you use to worship?’ They will reply, ‘We used to worship Messiah, the son of Allah.’ It will be said, ‘You are liars, for Allah has neither a wife nor a son. What (do you want now)?’ They will say, ‘We want You to provide us with water.’ It will be said to them, ‘Drink,’ and they will fall down in Hell (instead).

When there remain only those who used to worship Allah (alone), both the obedient ones and the mischievous ones, it will be said to them, ‘What keeps you here when all the people have gone?’ They will say, ‘We parted with them (in the world) when we were in greater need of them than we are today, we heard the call of one proclaiming, ‘Let every nation follow what they used to worship,’ and now we are waiting for our Lord.’ Then the Almighty will come to them in a form (jānūn) other than the one which they saw the first time, and He will say, ‘I am your Lord,’ [They will say: “(God protects us from you!) We associate nothing with God!” (We will stay here until our Lord comes to us. When our Lord comes, we will recognize Him!”]1024 And none will speak to Him then but the Prophets, and then it will be said to them, ‘Do you know any sign by which you can

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1024 Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 2:275; idem, Kitāb al-Sunnah (ed. ‘Abd Allah b. Hasan b. Ḥusayn; Maṭba‘at al-Salafiyya, 1931), 42.
recognize Him? ["Yes!" they will say. "Sura a leg will be uncovered (68:42)."] and so Allah will then uncover His Leg whereupon every believer will prostrate before Him..."

God will thus appear on the Day of Judgment in a visible form (ṣūrah), but one that the believers won't recognize. It differs, we are told, from the form God had the 'first time' the people saw him. The commentators tell us that 'the first time' is a reference to the Primordial Covenant (mithāq) alluded to in surat al-'Araf [7]:172. The pre-incarnate souls of humanity, prior to the creation of Adam's physical body, entered into a primordial covenant with their creator to serve him alone once they are sent to earth. The first time the people saw God, then, was prior to creation; they saw then God's primordial form. It is this divine form the people expected to see on the Day of Judgment. Instead, however, God shows up in a new, unrecognized form. The commentators tended to understand the point of this test (iḥtīān) as a means of distinguishing the true believers from the hypocrites and others. The faithful are expected to recognize their Lord, the strange form notwithstanding.

The important question is, of course, what is the nature of these two forms? The primordial form is presumably anthropomorphic: the sign of the leg suggests this. A variant of this hadith reads, "Then the Lord of the worlds will come to them under a more lowly form [fit andā ṣūratin] than that under which they had seen Him [before]." It is not clear what makes this eschatological form "lowly" or how exactly it differs from the primordial form of God. However, as we saw above, the eschatological form had been identified in some circles with the youthful form (shābib). In this case, Islam would seem to have taken a 'rabbinic' approach to the question of the relation of the young eschatological deity to the (old) primordial deity: they are the same deity in distinct theophanic forms. There are a number of points of contact between the Islamic and Jewish traditions, this 'transfiguration of God' motif for starters. In both traditions the

1025 Al-Bukhari, Sahih, hadith 24/5; tafsir 4/8; Muslim, imám 302; Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 2:275.

1026 For a discussion of this hadith, its variants, and the various interpretations of the commentators see Ginaret, Dieu à l'image de l'homme, 137-142.

1027 See Ginaret, Dieu à l'image de l'homme, 139.

1028 Al-Bukhari, ta'wird 24/5.

1029 See above.
ability/inability of the believers to recognize the eschatological (youthful) deity as God is stressed. Both traditions also stress the beauty of the youthful Erscheinungsform. In the Jewish tradition the divine ‘Youth’ is specifically ‘given’ to Moses: “he (the ‘Youth’) was not given to Adam, nor to Shem, nor to Abraham, nor to Isaac, nor to Jacob, but only to Moses.” This youthful deity is the Master of the mysteries and has all the treasuries of wisdom, which he opened up to Moses alone, revealing to him the Torah (Written and Oral), the secret of the creation of heaven and earth, plus the “Wisdom and Knowledge and Thought and the Gnosis of things above and the fear of heaven.” In the cognate Islamic tradition it is Muḥammad to whom the beautiful divine youth appears and reveals the knowledge of “all that is in the heavens and on the earth.”

Both David Halperin and Josef van Ess have pointed to these Jewish precedents to Islam’s youthful deity. They both also assume that the Jewish tradition influenced the Islamic through the mediation of Shi‘ī Gnosticism. This cannot be correct. The widespread acceptance of this divine imagery in early Sunnism and its relatively early rejection by Shi‘ism argues against this assumption. Also, the “influence” of one tradition by another is probably not what we are dealing with here. Rather, in the cultural milieu of the sixth and seventh century Near East the elements of religious discourse, concerning the Vision of God and other issues, “circulated freely, being transformed and adapted to the particular needs of each religion.” Michael Zwettler plausibly suggests that “among the predominantly monotheistic milieu of the sixth- and seventh-century Near East there had evolved a reasonably conventionalized, perhaps even sacralized, mode or genre of discourse for representing instances of divine intervention and communication.” That this motif of the Old and Young deities was a part of that conventionalized discourse is likely.


1034 Zwettler, “Mantic Manifesto,” 100.
6.3. Concluding Remarks

Van Ess appropriately points out that we can not be sure whether this discussion of theophany and Visio Dei in the Urgemünde actually took place. The Companions of Muḥammad would become symbols of identity for certain groups and tendencies that used them as label and pretence.\footnote{Van Ess, "Muhammad's Ascension," 18-19; idem, "Vision and Ascension," 59.} Much of what is related about them is therefore projection rather than reality. Van Ess is therefore "pretty sure that the question became a matter of serious dispute only later on, perhaps not before the end of the first century."\footnote{Van Ess, "Vision and Scension," 59.} This last point does not seem likely. Our reading of surat al-Najm [53]:1-18, particularly v. 12 ("Do you then dispute with him concerning what he saw?") suggests that already in the early Meccan community there was a controversy over Muḥammad's claim to have seen God.\footnote{See also Q 17.60, "The Vision We showed you was only a test for people". Wagtenonk, "Fasting in the Koran", 109 n. 3 notes regarding this verse: "it...appears that the representation of a vision as reality led to disbelief among the hearers."} The affair of Muḥammad’s prophetic rival in Medina, Ibn Ṣayyād, who mimicked Muḥammad by claiming to have experienced a thronetheophany, suggests two things relevant here: (1) in Medina Muḥammad was still claiming a vision of God as his prophetic credential, pace van Ess and others who assume that he abandoned this claim there; (2) the rumors that circulated among the Companions regarding Ibn Ṣayyād’s visionary claim and Muḥammad’s rejection of these claims and characterization of his rival’s vision as that of the Devil indicates some measure of continuing controversy over claims of visio Dei in the Urgemünde. While these circumstances don’t guarantee the authenticity of the hadīth reports cited above, they do argue against a late first/seventh century date for the beginning of a dispute over visio Dei.
Chapter VII:

Al-Ru‘ya and the Articulation of Sunnism

“The severely anthropomorphic image of God of oldest Islam is of course very early and was not at all objected to by rationalist considerations alone. The legends which unabashedly speak of the Prophet’s encounter with God depict popular belief, not theological doctrine.” Tor Andrae, *Die person Muhammeds in lehre und glauben seiner gemeinde*.

7.1. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Al-Ru‘ya and Proto-Sunnism

Josef van Ess took note of the “high degree of acceptance which the anthropomorphic interpretation of sūrat al-Najm found in the early community.” But this widespread affirmation of Muḥammad’s ru’ya Allāh was not confined to the ʿāmma or common folk as implied by Andrae’s statement above. Rather, the Vision found wide acceptance among the intellectual elite of the proto-Sunnī circles of the General Religious Movement in particular. Especially indicative of the place of Muḥammad’s Vision in proto-Sunnī thought is its affirmation by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728).

W. Montgomery Watt assesses al-Ḥasan “the outstanding representative of the earlier religious scholars.” According to Duncan Black Macdonald “[al-Ḥasan] seems to have been the chief center of the religious life and movements of his time” and Louis Massignon sees in him the “first historical manifestation of Sunnism.” A distinct

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1040 Watt, *Formative Period*, 64.

1041 Development of Muslim Theology, 129.

‘Sunnism,’ Jonathan Berkey reminds us, was not yet articulated during al-Hasan’s time: “first historical manifestation of proto-Sunnism” might therefore be a more apt characterization. The high regard with which al-Hasan is held by Muslims of all eras has made him the mouthpiece for several later trends seeking validation by the orthodox. Statements attributed to him must therefore be approached with caution. But his secure place at the very center of late Umayyad religiosity makes his dogmatic ideas profoundly significant for an understanding of doctrinal trends in that period.

Al-Hasan is best known for his Qadarite leanings as indicated in his Risāla or epistle allegedly written to and upon the request of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 684-704). But his views on the Divine Attributes appear just as radical. Al-Hasan affirmed that the pious will see God openly on the Day of Resurrection. Prophet Muḥammad, on the other hand, saw God in this world. According to Massignon “on the vision of God (ruʿya) [al-Hasan] was almost alone with Ibn ‘Abbās in affirming that it was really the divine essence (and not the angel) that Muḥammad beheld during his night journey.” While we now know that these two were in no way alone in affirming Muḥammad’s vision of God, al-Hasan’s affirmation is notable. According to al-Mubarak b. Faḍālah (d. 782), pupil of al-Hasan, the latter “swore by Allah (halafa bi-llāhī)” that Muḥammad saw his Lord. Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 938) relates in his Tafsīr the following report from ‘Abbād b. Maṣūr:

I [‘Abbād] asked Ikrima [about] “His heart lied not about what he saw (53:11).” Ikrima

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1043 Formation of Islam, 85.

1044 See especially Suliman Ali Mourad, Early Islam Between Myth and History: Al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728 C.E) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006).


said: “You expect that I will report to you that [Muḥammad] saw Him?”
I ['Abbād] said: “Yes.” [Ikrīma] said: “Indeed he saw Him. Then he saw Him [again].” I
['Abbād] asked al-Ḥasan about it and he said: “He saw His splendor, and His majesty,
and His garment (ridā’hu).” 1049

Exactly what al-Ḥasan might have meant by “His garment” is not clear. Is it the ridā’ al-
kābriya’, Mantel of Grandeur that covers God’s Face? Or is it the red or green ḥulla
donned by the youthful God of several reports? This cannot be answered definitively. Did
the Prophet see God with his eyes or heart? This too is difficult to answer. According to
al-Baghwī al-Ḥasan believed the Prophet saw God with his eyes. 1050 Ibn Kathīr found
this speculative. 1051 On the other hand al-Ḥasan is said to have interpreted Muḥammad’s
Night Journey spiritually: isnā’ bi-rūḥ rasūl Allāh (s) wa huwa nā’im ‘alā fīrāshhi, “the Night
Journey was in the Messenger of God’s (s) spirit while he was asleep in his bed.” 1052 It is
not clear, however, that al-Ḥasan assumed the Night Journey to be the occasion of the
Vision. 1053

According to the above ḥadīth from ‘Abbād b. Maṣūr al-Ḥasan interpreted sūrat al-
Najm [53]:11 theochemically. 1054 When ‘Abbād asked him regarding 53: 8 (“he drew near
and hung suspended”) “Who drew near, Abū Saʿīd?” al-Ḥasan reportedly answered:
“My Lord.” 1055 Ibn Mubārik reported that al-Ḥasan said concerning “He saw him
descend another time (53:15)”: “Muḥammad saw his Lord.” 1056 Al-Qurṭubī and al-
Nawawī report that al-Ḥasan read istawā’ of 53:9 as istawā’ ‘alā ‘l-arsh, “(God) sat upright

Muḥammad al-Taʾīyib; Makkah al-Mukarrama, al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabīyah al-Saʿūdiyyah; al-

1050 Al-Baghwī, Tafsīr, 4: 247.


1052 Al-Balādhurī, Anṣāb al-ṣurūf (ed. Muḥammad Hamīdullah; Cairo, 1959) 253 # 593; Ibn Qayyim al-
Jawzīya, Zad al-maʿād, 3:30.

1053 See Anawati and Gardet, Mystique Musulmane, 24; Massignon, Essai, 27.

1054 See also Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥākim, Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (Cairo: Dar al-Ḥadīth, 1992) 2: 308.

1055 Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-tawḥīd, 213.

1056 ‘Abd Allāh, Kitāb al-Sunnah, 1: 293, #565 (Cf. ibid., 1:178, # 221); al-Baghwī, Tafsīr, 4: 247. See also
Qaṭṭāʾ Iyād, al-Shifa, 107.
on the Throne.” But an angelophanic reading of these verses is also attributed to al-
Hāsan. Al-Ṭabarī reports regarding 53:8 that it was Jibrīl who drew close and hung
suspended according to al-Hāsan. According to Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Rahīm’s Tafsīr
al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī al-Ḥasan read 53:6-9 as: “After establishing himself (istiwaḥt) on the
highest horizon Jibrīl drew near to the earth and then descended to the Messenger of God
(ṣ).”

Al-Ḥasan therefore shows a Doppelgesicht in the sources regarding the interpretation of
sūrat al-Najm. He doesn’t, however, regarding whether or not the Prophet saw God. It is
not entirely clear whether he saw Him during the Night Journey or on some other
occasion, or if he saw Him with his eyes or in a dream-vision, but this “first historical
manifestation of (proto-)Sunnism” apparently emphatically affirmed that he did see God.
And in this he was not alone among the scholars of proto-Sunnism. ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr,
whom we will probably discover is our best available source for an authentically early
(though not necessarily authentic) biography of the Prophet, affirmed the Vision despite
the passionate rejection of his famous aunt. ‘Urwa’s famous student al-Zuhrī affirmed it,
as did Abu Ṣalih b. Šāliḥ (d. 720), Makhūl al-Shāmī (d. 730-35), Ma’mar b. Rāshid (d. 770),
al-‘Awzā’ī (d. 773), and apparently even Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), the

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1057 Al-Qurtubī, al-Ǧāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān, 17:88; al-Nawawī, Sharḥ Sahih Muslim, 2:10; al-Qāsimī, Tafsīr al-
Qāsimī, 6:363.

1058 Al-Ṭabarī, Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān, 27:44.


1060 Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, “Reconstructing the Earliest sīra Text: the Hiğra in the Corpus of
Muḥammad: the Production and Evaluation of the Corpus of Traditions according to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr,”

1061 Ibn Ḥajar, al-Fath al-Bārī, 8:608.

1062 Ibid.


1064 Makhūl transmitted ḥadīth aḥsan sīra from ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Āʾish and ḥadīth al-shābī from Anas b.
Malik. See al-Baghawi, Tafsīr 4:69; Ibn Abī Ṭāsīm, Al-Sunnah, 1: 326; al-Dāraquṭnī, Kitāb al-Rawḍa, 319 # 235;
322 #237.

author of the canonical biography (Ṣīra) of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{1067}

7.2. ʿAhmad b. Ḥanbal, al-Ruʿya and Sunnism

Van Ess is therefore undoubtedly correct in suggesting that in the late Umayyad period “a broad consensus” supported a theophanic interpretation of Ṣūrat al-ʿNajm and/or affirmed Muḥammad’s visionary encounter with God.\textsuperscript{1068} He errs, though, in his suggestion that such notions were relegated to the “margins of official theology” once the doctrinal ecumenism that characterized the General Religious Movement of the 8\textsuperscript{th} century gave way in the 9\textsuperscript{th} century onward to an emerging concept of orthodoxy and deviance.\textsuperscript{1069} On the contrary, the sources clearly and unambiguously indicate that Sunni orthodoxy,\textsuperscript{1070} in its beginnings in Baghdād in the 9\textsuperscript{th} century until its maturity in the 10-

\textsuperscript{1067} Al-ʿAwzāʾī transmitted hadīth ʿalsan sūra on the authority of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿĀʾish. He reportedly stopped Khālid b. al-Lajjāj as he passed by and asked him to recite this hadīth, after which al-ʿAwzāʾī proclaimed: “I have not seen one more knowledgeable in this hadīth that this man!” See al-Lālikāʾī, Ṣarḥ aṣūl 2: 514 # 902; al-Bayhaqī, Al-ʿAsmaʾ wa al-Sīḥāt, 2:73ff; al-Dārāquṭnī, Kitāb al-Ruʿya, 319 #235.

\textsuperscript{1068} According to van Ess (Flowering of Muslim theology, 73) Ibn Iṣḥāq “could hardly conceive of the idea that the Prophet had seen God in person.” This cannot be correct. Ibn Iṣḥāq, we learn from Ibn al-Jawzi (Kitāb Abkhabār al-Sīḥāt, 182 [Eng.]) was the sole transmitter of the hadīth al-shābīb featuring Ibn ʿUmar’s query to Ibn ʿAbbās. Ibn Iṣḥāq transmitted, or according Ibn al-Jawzi fabricated, the following hadīth: “[The Prophet] saw [his Lord], and it appeared that His legs were covered with a green garment and that He was shielded by a screen made of pearls (Ibid. See also al-Bayhaqī, Al-ʿAsmaʾ wa al-Sīḥāt, 2:445).” Ibn Iṣḥāq, we are also told, transmitted the hadīth al-ruʿya of Asmaʾ and the report of Abū Hurayra affirming that Muhammad indeed saw God. Ibn Iṣḥāq is associated with too many of these reports for van Ess’s assessment to be accurate. If we wonder why none of these traditions feature in his Sīrat Rasūl Allāh we need only consult Ibn Hishām’s preamble to his edition of this work where he admits to: “omitting some things recorded in this book in which there is no mention of the Apostle and about which the Qurʾān says nothing and which are not relevant to anything in this book or an explanation of it or evidence for it…things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakkaʾī told me he could not accept as trustworthy – all these things I have omitted.” Guillaume, 691.

\textsuperscript{1069} Van Ess, “Vision and Ascension,” 55.

\textsuperscript{1070} Van Ess, “Le Mīrāǧ et la Vision de Dieu,” 41.

\textsuperscript{1071} I use the terms ‘orthodox/heresy’ hesitantly, recognizing the difficulty with which they are employed in an Islamic context. Islam has no machinery comparable to the ecumenical councils of Christendom whereby a doctrinal tenet could be formally declared ‘orthodox’ or ‘heretical’. However, by a process of ijmaʾ or consensus a wide area of agreement may be reached, giving a doctrine or set of doctrines or practices legitimacy. (See Watt, The Formative Period, 5f. Also Alexander Knysh, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy’ in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment.” MW 83 [1993]: 48-67. But cf. John B. Henderson, The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy [New York: State University of New York Press, 1998], 49ff). Prof. Sherman Jackson has well made the point that even in the absence of such formal mechanisms, via the informal authority of groups and individuals a community, in this case the Muslim community, can regulate theological dissent and gain public recognition for what it deems to be ‘right’ as opposed to ‘wrong’ belief. (Sherman A. Jackson, On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam. Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī’s Faysal al-
11th centuries, included in its dogmatic articulation the affirmation of Muhammad's vision of his Lord.

Sunni orthodoxy consolidated in the 9th century around Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855). If, as Henry Laoust suggested, Islamic orthodoxy can be likened to a series of concentric circles with the traditionalists (Ashab al-Hadith) innermost, Christopher Melchert proposes that Ibn Hanbal was at the very center for the 9th century. Indeed, due largely to his (at least popularly perceived) defiant stance during the Mihna (833-850) Ibn Hanbal's 'aqida (dogmatic creed) became the shibboleth of early Sunni doctrine. It was probably through his efforts that Muhammad's niyyat Allah became a fundamental tenet of early Sunnism.


1071 It was in the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad that Sunni orthodoxy evolved. See Van Ess, TG 3: 29ff; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Religion and Politics Under the Early 'Abbasids: the Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 161. On Baghdad and Sunni orthodoxy see further Berkey, Formation of Islam, 187; George Makdisi, “Remarks on Traditionalism in Islamic Religious History,” in Carl Leiden (ed.), The Conflict of Traditionalism and Modernism in the Muslim Middle East (Austin, Texas: University Texas, 1966) 81 [art.=77-86].

1072 Christopher Melchert observed that: “By and large, Sunni orthodoxy crystallized in the third Islamic century/ninth century CE. At the center of the new orthodoxy lay the traditionalist creed of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and his followers.” “Sectaries in the Six Books: Evidence for the Exclusion from the Sunni Community,” MWB 82 (1992): 287 [art.=287-295]. Nagel, History of Islamic Theology, 237 notes as well: “As far as we can tell from the sources...a clear idea of what orthodoxy was developed mainly among Ahmad ibn Hanbal's students and their students in Baghdad.” See also Hodgson, Venture of Islam, 391-2.


1074 Wilfred Madelung notes that “it was no doubt due to the authority of Ibn Hanbal than to Ibn Kullâb that the eternity of the Koran henceforth became a dogma for the great majority of Sunni Muslims.” “The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran,” in his Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), V: 515. This is true for many aspects of Sunni doctrine (See also Henderson, The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy, 58). Makdisi, “Remarks,” 79: “Ahmad b. Hanbal...is responsible for Traditionalism’s triumph in the realm of theology.”
Ibn Hanbal reported the *hadith ahsan sūra* with four *asānīd* (chains of transmission) in his *Musnad*. For example:

Abū 'Āmir < Zuhayr b. Muḥammad < Yazīd b. Yazīd b. Jābir < Khalid b. al-Lajlāj < 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Āish < some of the Companions of the Prophet:

One morning, the Messenger of God went out to them (his companions) in a joyous mood and a radiant face. We said [to him]: “Oh Messenger of God, here you are in a joyous mood and a glowing face!” “How could I not be?” he answered. “My Lord came to me last night under the most beautiful form, and He said [to me]: ‘Oh Muhammad!’—‘Here I am, Lord, at Your order!’ He said [to me]: ‘Over what disputes the Exalted Assembly?’—‘I do not know, Lord.’ He posed [to me] two or three times the same question. Then He put His palm between my shoulder blades, to the point where I felt its coolness between my nipples, and from that moment appeared to me [all] that is in the heavens and on the earth...” etc.

There is controversy over the Imam’s position on this particular report from 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Āish. Ibn Hajar reports from Abū Zur‘a (d.878) that the latter asked Ibn Hanbal about this report and he replied: “This is of no consequence (*hadhā laysa bi-shay‘īn*).” Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) reports a similar position from Alīn in his *Daf Shubah al-tashbīḥ bi-akaff al-tanzīh*. He quotes the Imam as stating: “The origins of this hadith and its sources are disturbed (*muḍṭaribā*).” Yet, Ibn al-Jawzī reports this very narration from Ibn Hanbal in his *Al-'llal l-mutanāhiya fi 'l-aḥādīth al-wāhiya*. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ahmad (d. 903), the Imam’s son and the person most responsible for the publication of his dogmatic works, likewise narrates the hadith from his father in his *Kitāb al-Sunna*. According to Nūr al-Dīn al-Haythamī, when Ibn

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Hanbal was asked about the report, he declared it correct/right (sawāb). In any case, whatever criticisms Ibn Hanbal may have had with the isnād of this particular report on the authority of Ibn 'Ā'ish, the Imam explicitly declared sahīh (sound) the cognate report from Mu'adh b. Jabal. The Imam's acceptance of aḥadīth ahsan șūra is therefore not really in question.

How did Ibn Hanbal understand this report? The Hanbali mutakallim Ibn al-Jawzī reports from the Hanbali al-Qāḍī Abū Ya'la's (d. 1066) Kitāb al-Kifaya that Ahmad stated: "I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form,' i.e., in the best position (ma'wli)". Interpreting "most beautiful form" as "best position" effectively eliminates the anthropomorphism of the text. But there are problems with this report from Ibn al-Jawzī. First, it is at variance with al-Qāḍī Abū Ya'la's own exegesis of this narration as found in his Kitāb al-Mu'tamad fi Uṣūl al-Dīn. According to what we read, God truly has a most beautiful form, in the same manner he has a soul and an essence:

If it is said, "He is a person (shakhs) or form (ṣūra)," it (should be) said: The report from different routes on the night of the mu'raj mentioned, "I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form"...And the application of that is not to be refused. Just as "soul" (nafs) not like souls and essence (dhāt) not like essences weren't denied Him. Likewise form unlike forms, for the shari'a (uses it in this manner).

Secondly, 'Abd Allāh b. Ahmad quotes from his father a startlingly different exegesis of this hadith, startling in its frank anthropomorphic suggestions.

[Abd Allāh said]: My father (Ibn Ḥanbal) reported to me...from 'Abd al-Rahmān b. al-'A'ish from some of the companions of the Prophet: "He came out to them one morning while in a joyous mood and a radiant face. We said [to him]: 'Oh Messenger of God, here you are in a joyous mood and a glowing face!' --'How could I not be?' he answered. 'My Lord came to me last night under the most beautiful form, and He said [to me]: "O Muhammad!...'" And my father (Ibn Hanbal) reported to us, 'Abd al-Razzāq from Ma'mar from Qatāda [from the Prophet], "Allah created Adam according to His form."


My father reported to us, ʿAbd al-Razzāq from Maʿmar from Qatāda, “in the best stature (fi ʿahsani taqwīmin) meaning ‘in the most beautiful form (fi ʿahsani širātīn).’” Ibrāhīm b. al-Hajjāj reported to us, Hammād b. Salama reported to us...that the Prophet said, “Allāh is beautiful and He loves beauty.”

The implication of this collection of traditions is unmistakable. The “most beautiful form” is first identified with that form of God according to which Adam was created. This identification is further supported by the Imām’s interpretation of Sārat al-Tīn, “Surely We created man in the best stature (fi ʿahsani taqwīmin) (95:4).” Ibn Ḥanbal accepts the tafsīr or exegesis of Qatāda identifying man’s “best stature” with God’s “most beautiful form.” Because Adam was created according to God’s own form, this identification is logical. It is then affirmed that God is physically beautiful. On this reading the ‘Imām of Baghdaḍ’ quite clearly took the theophanic form of God seriously.

Ibn Ḥanbal seems to have been the first traditionalist to include Muḥammad’s visionary encounter with God in his creed. He declared in his ʿAqidah III that one of the fundamental principles of the Sunna (ʿusūl al-sunna) was:

to have faith in the Beatific Vision on the Day of Judgment...and that the Prophet has seen his Lord, since this has been transmitted from the Messenger of God and is correct and authentic. It has been reported from Qatāda, from ʿIkrima, from Ibn ʿAbbās and al-Hakam b. Abān reported it from ʿIkrima, from Ibn ʿAbbās and ʿAlī b. Zayd likewise reported it from Yūsuf b. Mahrān, from Ibn ʿAbbās.

And the hadith, in our estimation, is to be taken upon its apparent meaning (ʿalā ẓahirīn), as it has come from the Prophet. Indulging in Kālim (theological speculation) with respect to it is an innovation. But we have faith in it as it came, upon its apparent meaning, and we do not dispute with anyone regarding it.

1085 Ibn Ḥanbal, Kitāb al-Sunna, 159.
1086 ‘Abd Allāh, Kitāb al-Sunna, 2:490.
1087 On the hadith, “God is beautiful...” Daniel Gimaret notes: “the sense of the word jamīl is unequivocal: it is about beauty, and of physical, material beauty.” Dieu à l’image, 260. Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, 28:137f, #17206.
1088 The Shāfiʿī al-Alāʾī (d. 1027), in his Sharh usūl iʿtiqād al-ʿAbī l-sunna wa l-jamāʾa reports ʿaqīdah for the various muḥaddithīn but Muḥammad’s ruʿyat Allāh is not found in any of the pre-Ḥanbalī creeds.


A literalist interpretation (‘alā ‘l-ẓāhir) of the reports of Muḥammad’s Visio Dei has therefore been made a doctrinal mandate by the “Imām of Baghdad.” In his ‘Aqīda V Ahmad argued that “Belief in that (Muḥammad’s ru’yat Allāh) and counting it true is obligatory.”¹⁰⁹¹ Which reports is Ibn Ḥanbal invoking in whose belief is obligatory? As far as the iṣnād ‘Alī b. Zayd < Yūsuf b. Mahrān < Ibn ‘Abbās I checked the twenty-three occurrences of this chain listed in the index of Shu’ayb al-Arnā’ut’s edition of Ibn Ḥanbal’s Musnad and found no ḥadīth al-Ru’yā;¹⁰⁹² nor have I located this report in any other source. I likewise checked the four listings of the iṣnād al-Ḥakam b. Abān < ‘Ikrima < Ibn ‘Abbās and found no ḥadīth al-Ru’yā.¹⁰⁹³ However, Ḥanbali mutakallim Ibn al-Jawzī reports in his Daf Shubah al-tashbīḥ a report with this chain: “The Prophet said: ‘I saw my Lord curly haired and beardless, on Him a green hulla.’”¹⁰⁹⁴ Ibn ‘Adī in his al-Kāmil and al-Dhabābi in his Mizān al-ṭiṣādī fī naqd al-rijāl report a similar ḥadīth with the chain al-Ḥakam b. Abān < Zirik < ‘Ikrima < Ibn ‘Abbās: “[The Prophet said]: I saw my Lord in the form of a young man, curly haired and beardless.”¹⁰⁹⁵ There is also another ḥadīth al-Ru’ya with this chain reported in several collections, including Al-Tirmidhī’s Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ, narrated, however, from al-Ḥakam b. Abān by Salm b. Ja’far rather than Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥakam b. Abān as in the ḥadīth reported by Ibn al-Jawzī:

Once I (‘Ikrima) asked Ibn ‘Abbās if Muḥammad had seen his Lord. He answered: “Yes, he saw Him as if He had His feet in verdure, and in front of him a curtain of pearls.” Following which, ‘Ikrima said to Ibn ‘Abbās: “Didn’t God say: lā tudrīkahu l-abṣāru (6:103)?” Ibn ‘Abbās answered: “God wanted to speak of His light: when He appeared in His light, nothing can reach Him (lā yudrīkahu shay’). [Muḥammad indeed saw his Lord twice.]”¹⁰⁹⁶


¹⁰⁹⁶ See above n. 776.
There is nothing to tell us which of these reports Ibn Hanbal had in mind in his *ʿAQīda III*. We are on firmer ground, however, with the first chain he cites: Qatāda < ʿIkrima < Ibn ʿAbbās. This report is cited twice in his *Musnad*:

Aswad b. ʿĀmir [Shādhān] reported to us: Hammād b. Salama reported to us on the authority of Qatāda, on the authority of ʿIkrima, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās. He said: “The Messenger of God (ṣ) said: ‘I saw my Lord, Blessed and Most High’.”

ʿAffān (b. Muslim) reported to us: ʿAbd al-Ṣamʿam b. Kaysān reported to us: Hammād b. Salama reported to us on the authority of Qatāda, on the authority of ʿIkrima, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās. He said: “The Messenger of God (ṣ) said: ‘I saw my Lord, Blessed and Most High’.”

These two *ruʿya*-traditions are here reported *mukhtar* or abridged from a fuller ḥadīth as was the common practice at this time. The question is, Which ḥadīth al-*ruʿya* are these abridgments of? Ibn Kathīr suggests that the Aswad b. ʿĀmir, etc. report was abridged from ḥadīth al-*manām* (“report of the dream [vision]”) and quotes from Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad* the ḥadīth aḥsan sūra from Maʿmar b. Rāshid < Ayyub al-Sikhtiyānī < Abū Qilābā al-Baṣrī < Ibn ʿAbbās < the Prophet. “My Lord came to me last night in the most beautiful form—I think (says Ibn ʿAbbās) he meant in his sleep.” But this identification is impossible; the ismāʿīds conflict. There is a ḥadīth aḥsan sūra with the partial ismāʿ ḥadīth < ʿIkrima < Ibn ʿAbbās, but it is reported from al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī al-Baṣrī < Ibrāhīm b. Abū Suwayd < Hammād < Qatada, etc., not Aswad b. ʿĀmir < Hammād < Qatada, etc ( #2580 in Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad*), nor ʿAffān b. Muslim < ʿAbd al-

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1099 Ibn Abī ʿĀsim (822-900), for example, a younger contemporary of Ibn Ḥanbal, after reporting in his al-Ṣunna the same tradition from Aswad b. ʿĀmir, etc., “The Messenger of God (ṣ) said: ‘I saw my Lord, Blessed and Most High’” (1:311 #449) then adds, “then he (i.e. Muhammad) mentioned the (full) wording, *thumma diikara kalām*” (This latter phrase indicates clearly that “I saw my Lord” is simply shorthand, and is not be taken as the full report. This point is confirmed by Ibn Abī ʿĀsim’s editor, Muhammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, who notes regarding this tradition *huwa mukhtasar min hadīth al-*ruʿya, “it is abridged from the report of the Vision.” On Ibn Ḥanbal’s (?) abridgment see Ibn Kathīr, *Ṭafsīr*, 7: 450; Khalīdān Ḥaddad, *Zawaʿid*, 8:37-40.


Şammad b. Kaysān < Ḥammād < Qatāda, etc. (#2634 in Ibn Ḥanbal’s Musnad).\(^{1102}\) The Aswad b. ‘Āmir, etc., tradition is quoted in full by Ibn ‘Adī,\(^{1103}\) al-Bayhaqī,\(^{1104}\) al-Dhahabi,\(^{1105}\) and al-Suyūṭī\(^{1106}\) while the ‘Affān b. Muslim, etc. tradition by Khāṭîb al-Baghdādī,\(^{1107}\) al-Dhahabi,\(^{1108}\) Khālidun Aḥdād,\(^{1109}\) and al-Suyūṭī.\(^{1110}\)

Aswad b. ‘Āmir < Ḥammād < Qatada < ‘Ikrima < Ibn ‘Abbās < the Prophet: “I saw my Lord Blessed and Most High [in the form of a young man], curly-haired and beardless.”


The reports abbreviated in Ibn Ḥanbal’s Musnad are therefore အားထိုးစေချိန် သို့မဟုတ် Reports of the (Divine) Youth. This shortening of the reports has suggested to some the Imām’s reluctance to attribute to God such an uncompromisingly anthropomorphic description.\(^{1112}\) But there is sufficient evidence to dismiss this suggestion. The Ḥanbalī al-Ṭabarānī (d. 971), for example, reported in his al-Sunna from ‘Abd Allāh, Ibn Ḥanbal’s son:

My father reported to us (that) Aswad b. ‘Āmir and Muḥammad b. Muḥammad ‘Aqaba al-Shaybānī al-Kūf reported (that) al-Ḥasan b. ‘Āli al-Ḥalwānī reported (that) ‘Affān

\(^{1102}\) Ḥammād transmits another ḥadīθ aḥsan jūra, but from Thābit < Anas b. Mālik. Al-Dhahabi, Taḥkīs, 26; al-Suyūṭī, al-La‘āqī, 31. The innaṣ is Sufyān b. Zuyād < Fahd b. ‘Awwāf < Ḥammād, etc.

\(^{1103}\) Al-Kāmil, 2:677.

\(^{1104}\) Al-Asmā‘ wa al-Ṣifāt, 2:363 # 938.

\(^{1105}\) Mīzān al-qāḍā‘l, 1:278.

\(^{1106}\) Al-La‘āqī, 1:29.

\(^{1107}\) Ta’rīkh Baghdād, 14 vols. (Cairo, 1931) 8:214, 5924.

\(^{1108}\) Taḥkīs, 26.

\(^{1109}\) Zawā‘id, 8:37.

\(^{1110}\) Al-La‘āqī, 1:30.


\(^{1112}\) ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Hāshidī, editor of al-Bayhaqī’s al-Asmā‘ wa al-Ṣifāt, suggested for example that the abridged narrations evince the Imām’s rejection of the expression “beardless, curly haired” and presumably “form of a young man.” 2:364.
reported (that) 'Abd al-Šammad b. Kaysān reported, and Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ b. al-
WaКd al-Nasī reported (that) 'Īsā b. Šādhān reported (that) Ibrāhīm b. Abī Suwaysd al-
Dirā reported; they all said: Hammād b. Salama reported to us on the authority of
Qatāda, on the authority of 'Ikrima, on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās. He said: "The
Messenger of God (s) said: ‘I saw my Lord in the form of a young man with abundant
hair.”"\(^{1113}\)

Ibn Ḥanbal thus narrated from multiple chains the ḥadīth al ṣāḥīb. Abū Bakr al-Marrudhī
(d. 888), reputedly "the preferred disciple of Ahmad b. Ḥanbal," asked his imām about
this hadīth, the latter getting visibly angry at those who denied it.

I read to Abū 'Abd Allāh (Ibn Ḥanbal): "(Aswād b. 'Amīr) Šādhān reported to us...from
Ibn ‘Abbās (that) the Messenger of Allāh (s) said, ‘I saw my Lord as a young man,
beardless and curly haired, and on him a green garment.’" I then said to Ibn Hanbal: "They say\(^{1114}\) [no one] reported [this hadīth] except Šādhān.” He (Ibn Ḥanbal) got
angry and said, "Who said this?" Afḍān reported to us that 'Abd al-Šammad b. Kaysān
reported to us that Hammād reported from Qatāda from 'Ikrima from Ibn 'Abbās from
the Messenger of Allāh, ‘I saw my Lord, Exalted and Great.’" I then said to [Ibn
Hanbal]: "O Abū ‘Abd Allāh, they say Qatāda didn’t report anything from 'Ikrima.”\(^{1115}\)
[He got angry and] said: "Who said this?" Then he pulled out [his book and in it] five,
six, or seven ḥadīth from Qatāda from 'Ikrima.\(^{1116}\)

It is evident from this report that, for Ibn Ḥanbal, "I saw my Lord” was simply shorthand
for the ḥadīth al ṣāḥīb and did not imply a rejection of its full content. This is further
confirmed by a report from 'Abd al-Šammad b. Yaḥyā that he was instructed to
specifically question the imām about this hadīth:

\[\text{[Shādhān said to me]: “Go to Abū ‘Abd Allāh and say, ‘Do you tell me that I should report the hadīth of Qatāda from 'Ikrima from Ibn 'Abbās, ‘I saw my Lord in the form of a young man’?”} \]

So I came to Abū ‘Abd Allāh and said it to him, and he said to me: "Report it, because the 'ulamā’ (religious scholars) have reported it.”\(^{1117}\)

\(^{1113}\) Al-Suyūṭī, al-Lā'ālī', 29.

\(^{1114}\) In a slightly different version reported by Ibn 'Adī, instead of "they say (tasqalāna)" we find, "you say (taqūlāna)." Ibn 'Adī, Al-Kāmil, 2:677.

\(^{1115}\) Ibn 'Adī’s version reads: "They say Qatada didn’t hear from 'Ikrima." Al-Kāmil 2:677.

\(^{1116}\) Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, Tabaqāt, 2:45f; Ibn 'Adī, Al-Kāmil, 2:677.

\(^{1117}\) Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, Tabaqāt, 1:218.
A final piece of evidence that Ibn Hanbal affirmed the most blatantly anthropomorphic expressions of this report comes from an anti-anthropomorphist among the Ḥanābīla, Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 1119). Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Hādī reported from Ibn ‘Aqīl’s lost Irshād on theology:

Someone asked Ibn Ḥanbal if he could report the ḥadīth of Ibn ‘Abbās...in which the Prophet reported to have seen his Lord with short curly hair, and Aḥmad is said to have told him to report it, since the religious scholars (‘ulamā’) have reported it. On this, Ibn ‘Aqīl said: “I treat these two traditions in the same way, in that Ibn Ḥanbal permitted him to report them interpreted metaphorically, not unqualifiedly, so that the form and the short curly hair are related to Muḥammad, not to his Lord.” 1118

The above report, coming from one so hostile to anthropomorphism, is strong evidence of the Imām’s affirmation of the anthropomorphisms of this ḥadīth. While Ibn ‘Aqīl does not hesitate to deem apocryphal any report offensive to God’s transcendence, in spite of its acceptance by the majority of his companions,1119 Ibn Ḥanbal’s affirming the use of these expressions was apparently too well established for even him to deny. Instead, Ibn ‘Aqīl chose a route he has traveled before: attribute to the Imām the use of ta’wīl (metaphorical interpretation) to do away with the anthropomorphism. This is contradicted, however, by Ibn Ḥanbal’s own discussion of the report in which he condemns ta’wīl in its regard:

And the ḥadīth, in our estimation, is to be taken by its apparent meaning (‘alā zāhirīhi), as it has come from the Prophet. And indulging in theological rhetoric with respect to it is an innovation. But we have faith in it as it came, upon its apparent meaning and we do not dispute with anyone regarding it.1120

While Ibn Ḥanbal’s support for hadīth al-shābb from Ibn ‘Abbās is therefore clear, he apparently rejected the hadīth al-shābb from Umm al-Ṭufayl. When asked about the narration, the Imām reportedly declared, “This is an unconfirmed ḥadīth (ḥadīh hadīth munkar). Marwān b. ‘Uthmān and ‘Umāra (b. ‘Āmir) are unknown (majhūl).” 1121

1119 Ibid., 104.
Imām is not rejecting the *Gottesbild* found in this report – he finds the *isnād* (chain of transmission) defective but says nothing of the *matn* (text). Ibn Ḥanbal’s rejection of this report is therefore based on strict *isnād* criticism, not dogmatic considerations. Al-Dhahabī likewise cited Aḥmad’s negative judgment of the Umm al-Ṭayyl report in his *Tartīb al-mawdū‘āt*. In his *Mizān al-ṭīdāl fi naqd al-rijāl* Al-Dhahabī considers the ḥadīth al-shābb from Ibn ʿAbbās. Al-Dhahabī is himself somewhat ambivalent regarding this report. He considered it one of the *ankar* or rejected transmissions of Ḥammād b. Salama, but then says, ḥādihi ‛il-ru’ya ru’ya manām in ṣaḥḥa, “This vision is a dream-vision if it is sound.” Al-Dhahabī then reports what he obviously considers Ibn Ḥanbal’s position on the ḥadīth, citing al-Marrudhī’s report of Ibn Ḥanbal’s support for the ḥadīth and anger with those who rejected it.

7.2.1. *Ru’ya bi’l-bāṣar or Ru’ya bi’l-qalb? Ibn Ḥanbal’s Doppelgesicht*

The central figure of 9th century Sunnism therefore not only affirmed Muḥammad’s visual encounter with a corporeal deity but he declared such affirmation a criterion of true faith. But what was the nature of this encounter? Did the Prophet see God with his eyes or with his heart? The reports are too conflicting to allow us to say for sure. According to Ibn Qayyīm al-Jawziyya the confusion began with a group of the Imām’s followers:

But Aḥmad did not say that [the Prophet] saw Him with the eyes of his head... Rather, he said once, “he saw Him” and once he said, “he saw Him with his heart”... And a third [opinion] is reported from him (Aḥmad) from the exaggeration (tawarruf) of some of his companions that he said “he saw Him with the eyes of his head.” And the texts of Aḥmad are available and that is not in them.

The situation is not this simple, however. Ibn Ḥanbal does report in his *Musnad* the

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1124 Ibid.

1125 See also Al-Dhahabī, *Taḳhīs*, 26.

exegetical tradition for sūrat al-Najm [53]:1-18 from Ibn ʿAbbās, “he saw his Lord with his heart twice,”¹¹²⁷ as well as the hadīth ahsan sūra in which Ibn ʿAbbās hazards the suggestion: “I think he meant during (his) sleep.”¹¹²⁸ Al-Lālikāʿī reports in his Sharḥ ʿusūl iʿtiqād that Ibn ʿHanbal was asked, “Which position do you take (išā ṣayy ʿadkhabū) regarding Muḥammad’s vision of his Lord?” to which the Imām replied: “(The position reflected in) the hadīth of al-Aʿmish, on the authority of Ziyād b. al-Ḥaṣim, on the authority of Abū al-ʿĀlīya, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās. He said: ‘The Prophet saw his Lord with his heart.’”¹¹²⁹

On the other hand, there is also textual evidence that the Imām acknowledged a vision of God during a wakened state. In the Musnad we read a hadīth ahsan sūra on the authority of Muʿadh b. Jabal in which the Prophet said:

I got up last night [to pray]. I did the ablution, I prayed what destiny wished that I pray; then while I was praying, sleepiness took me, and I fell asleep, until I woke up (hattā stayqaṣṭu) and there, in front of me, was my Lord, under the most beautiful form...¹¹³⁰

Al-Tirmidhī reported this hadīth from Muʿadh with the words fa-stathqalṭu “then I dozed off”¹¹³¹ instead of hattā stayqaṣṭu, making the appearance a dream-vision. Ibn ʿHanbal is alone in using the phrase hattā stayqaṣṭu (“until I woke up”) implying a physical seeing of God.¹¹³² Al-Mubārakfūrī relates the theory that istayqaṣṭu is a copyist misspelling (tashīf) from istathqalṭu,¹¹³³ but Ibn al-Jawzī narrated the hadīth from the Imām with the disputed words in place,¹¹³⁴ making the theory unlikely. According to Abū Muhammad al-Tamīmī (d. 1095) and al-Qāḍī Abū Yaʿlā, Ibn ʿHanbal believed the Prophet saw God

¹¹²⁷ Ibn ʿHanbal, Musnad, 3:425, #1957.
¹¹²⁸ Ibn ʿHanbal, Musnad, 5:437, #3484.
¹¹²⁹ Al-Lālikāʿī, Sharḥ ʿusūl iʿtiqād, 2:519 #916.
¹¹³⁰ Ibn ʿHanbal, Musnad, 5:243.
¹¹³² Girmaret, Dieu à l’image, 145ff.
¹¹³⁴ Al-Dhahabi, Taḥkīṣ, 25.
during the ṯurāt (ascension) with his eyes.\textsuperscript{1135} Abū Bakr al-Naqquš (d. 351/962) also reports the Imam as declaring: “I say that the ḥadīth of Ibn ‘Abbās means that (the Prophet) saw Him with his eyes.”\textsuperscript{1136} 

There is no way to tell which tradition represents Ibn Ḥanbal’s position. Maybe both do; perhaps the Imam affirmed both a ru‘ya bīl-bāsar and a ru‘ya bīl-qalb occurring on different occasions. In either case the Prophet’s visionary encounter with God was real according to Ibn Ḥanbal who affirmed: “Yes, he saw Him in reality (ra‘hu ḥaqqa), for the visions of the prophets are real.”\textsuperscript{1137}

7.2.2. Ibn Ḥanbal, Ḥadīth al-Shābb and the Sunnī Gottesbild

Ibn Ḥanbal was not the only leading traditionalist who made acceptance of Ḥadīth al-Shābb a criterion of right belief. The famous muḥaddith Yāḥyā b. Mā‘n (d. 847), about whom it is stated that the Prophet’s bedstead (ṣarīr) was brought out for him to be carried on when he died during Hajj in 847, condemned anyone who denied this particular report as an innovator (mubtaḍī‘),\textsuperscript{1138} and according to the traditionalist Abū Zur‘a al-Rāzī (d. 878) “none denies it except the Mu’tazila.”\textsuperscript{1139} Nascent (traditionalist) Sunnism was therefore characterized by belief in this corporeal and theophanous deity. We learn from the Zaydi imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 860) that the popular proto-Sunnī movement that looked to Ibn Ḥanbal as its figurehead accepted the report and based its view of God on it. Al-Qāsim wrote in his Kitāb al-Mustashkid

The Muslims (lit. those who pray) have agreed with us that the glances will not perceive God, except for a group of the Rāwafid, and the Hashwūya who agree with them. They said the Prophet had seen his Lord white-skinned and dark-haired. They related in another way that He had been seen in the form of an adolescent whose hair was cut off.

\textsuperscript{1135} Ibn Ḥanbal, Aqīda VII, apud Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, Ṭabaqāt, 2:271.

\textsuperscript{1136} Qādī ‘Iyād, al-Shīfa, 102; Andrae, Die Person, 75.

\textsuperscript{1137} Ibn Qayyīm al-Jawziyya, Žūd al-ma‘ād, 3:29.

\textsuperscript{1138} Al-Marzubānī, Kitāb nūr al-qubas al-mushṣar, 1: 48.

\textsuperscript{1139} Mūtaqī, Kanz al-umnān, 58 # 1153; Al-Suyūṭī, Al-La‘ālī‘, 30.
Some of them claimed that this seeing was with the heart, and some others claimed that it was with the eyes.\footnote{1140} For al-Qāsim, hashwū al-ʿāmma and hashwiyya denoted the pro-Umayyad, anthropomorphist traditionalists who accepted Ahmad b. Ḥanbal as their principle authority.\footnote{1141} Binyamin Abrahamov, editor of al-Qāsim’s works, translates the term as “scholars of the masses,” indicating the general acceptance of these ideas within the community.\footnote{1142} The Muʿtazilī essayist al-Jāḥiz (d. 869) writing around the same time describes the same doctrinal trend among the early Sunnis. He characterizes Ibn Ḥanbal’s supporters as Nābita,\footnote{1143} that is “contemptible, suddenly powerful, irritating sprouters on the scene.”\footnote{1144} According to al-Jāḥiz the Nābita insisted that God “is a body, and they ascribed a form (ṣūra) and limits to Him and declared anyone who believes in al-Ruʿya without tajís (ascribing a body to God) and taṣwīr (ascribing a form to God) to be a kāfir (infidel).”\footnote{1145} The ṣūra that the Nābita attributed to God was no doubt that of a shābb, “young man,” judging from al-Qāsim’s contemporary report and from later polemics against the group.\footnote{1146} Al-Jāḥiz informs us that, because of Ibn Ḥanbal and the concurrence of “the masses, the pious

\footnote{1140} Al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm, Kitāb al-Mustashqid, ed. and trns. by Binyamin Abrahamov in Anthropomorphism and Interpretation of the Qurʾān in the Theology of Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996], 133.

\footnote{1141} Al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm, Kitāb al-Dalīl al-Kabīr, ed. and trns. by Binyamin Abrahamov in Al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm on the Proof of God’s Existence (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 188; Abrahamov, Anthropomorphism and Interpretation of the Qurʾān, 133, n. 166.

\footnote{1142} Marshall Hodgson likewise argues that hashwiyya meant ‘vulgar populace’ and indicated ‘men of the people, of the majority.’ Venture of Islam, 1: 392 See also Zaman, Religion and Politics, 55.

\footnote{1143} EF 7:843 s.v. Nābita by Ch. Pellat


\footnote{1146} See for example the rescript of the Caliph al-Rādi in 935 below.
recluse, the jurists, and the hadith people,” the prevailing trend (ghālib) of the community had become anthropomorphism and determinism.

Ninth century Sunnism was therefore characterized by anthropomorphism based in part on hadith al-shābī. Muḥammad’s reported visionary encounter with God in corporeal form will continue to be an important aspect of Sunnī doctrine well into the 10th and 11th centuries, the period in which the creed more or less assumed its final form. The Shi’a, who in its early days countenanced Muḥammad’s vision, rejected it after accommodating and eventually embracing Mu’tazilism. But in the formulation of their theological self-definition, Shi’ite doctors contrasted themselves with their Sunnī rivals who, in their eyes, characteristically affirmed the Vision. Ibn Bābawayh (d. 991) relates in his Kitāb al-tawḥīd a discussion between the muḥaddith Abū Qurra Mūsā b. Taḥq al-Yamanī al-Zubūdī (d. 818) and Imām ‘Alī Riḍā (765-818) concerning the Vision. It is here quoted at length because it gives us insight into 10th century Sunnism, as least as conceived by 10th century Shiism. Abū Qurra begins: “We (the muḥaddithūn) narrate that Allah, the Almighty has divided His being seen (al-Ru’ya) and His speech (al-Kalām) between the two prophets. He gave Moses the opportunity to hear His speech. He granted to Prophet Muḥammad the opportunity to see Him.”

Imām Abū al-Ḥasan (‘Alī Riḍā) said, “Who conveyed the message from Allah to the two heavy communities, mankind and the Jinn, that says, ‘The eyes can not comprehend Him

1147 Al-Jāḥiẓ, Kitāb fi khalq al-Qur‘ān, apud al-Jāḥiẓ, Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ, 3:297
1150 Watt argues: “By the time of al-Ash’arī the doctrines of the creed had assumed more or less their final form, not merely for the Sunnites but also for the Imāmī and the Ismā’īlī Shi’ites...By 950 (despite) continuing (Sunnī) rivalries there was in actual practice a wide area of agreement.” The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, 317.
(6:103), 'they can not limit Him through their knowledge (20:110), 'there is nothing similar to Him (42:11),' was it not Muḥammad?' asked the Imām. Abū Qurra then replied: 'Yes, He was Prophet Muḥammad.' The Imām said: 'How can a person who brought such messages to all creatures and told them that he has brought such messages from Allah and called them to Alī by His commands and said, 'The eyes can not comprehend Him,' 'they can not limit Him through their knowledge,' 'there is nothing similar to Him,' then say, 'I saw Him with my own eyes. I did limit Him in my knowledge and that He is similar to a man? Should you not be ashamed of yourselves? Even the atheist have not said that the Prophet first brought one thing from Allah and then announced from Him other things contrary to the first.' Abū Qurra then said: 'Does Allah Himself not say, 'Indeed he saw him in another descent (53: 13)."' Imām Abū al-Hasan said: 'The other verses point out what the Prophet actually saw. Allah has said, 'His heart did not lie about what he saw (53: 11).' It means that the heart of Muḥammad did not belie what his eyes saw. Therefore, Allah in the subsequent verse has said, 'Indeed he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord (53:18). The signs of Allah are different from Allah Himself. Allah has also said, 'They can not limit Him in their knowledge.' If the eyes could see Him, then people might limit Him in their knowledge and He could be fully defined.' Abū Qurra then asked: 'Do you disregard hadīth?' Imām Abū al-Hasan replied, "If hadīth are contrary to Qur'ān, I disregard them. Besides, all Muslims believe that Allah cannot be limited by knowledge, that eyes can not see Him and that nothing is similar to Him."1154

Apocryphal though this anecdote no doubt is, it is significant for what it suggests about religious trends in 10th century Baghdād. Shiism is here presented as champion of the type of divine transcendence that characterized the Muʿtazila and that will eventually characterize Sunni Islam.1154 Sunnism, on the other hand, which is still traditionalist, is depicted as anthropomorphist and this based on a theocentric interpretation of Sūrat al-Najm and hadīth reports of Muḥammad's Vision. This is certainly consistent with what we otherwise know of 10th century Sunnism in Baghdād and elsewhere and thus cannot be dismissed as sectarian propaganda.

7.3. The Ḥanābila, al-Ruʿya and Sunni Orthodoxy in the 10th-11th Centuries

In order to fully appreciate the significance of Muḥammad's Vision for Sunnism one must have a proper perspective of the place of Ḥanbalism (the followers/school of Ibn Ḥanbal) within Sunnism. In his groundbreaking 1897 study of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal Walter Patton concluded:

1154 Ibn Bābawayh, Kitāb al-tauḥīd, 666.

The character of Ahmed (sic) as a traditionist, and his aversion to generalization and deduction, prevented him from leaving behind any system of opinions... Hence, the unimportant character of the Hanabite school. Their master's teaching was unsystematic, and much ground was lost ere his spirit and teaching could be put before the world in such a form as to accomplish any powerful effect. His personality in his lifetime and after his death was a great force in the Muslim world; and the personality seems yet to be as powerful in its influence as the opinions which he enunciated, though his following has never been as great in comparison with that of the other three orthodox Imams (emphasis added-VW).

This observation of the relative smallness of the Hanabite and their consequent lack of influence will survive the sympathetic Laoust-Makdisi revision of the Western historiography of Hanbalism. Thus, Wael Hallaq, in explaining his uneven treatment

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of the four madhāhib (legal schools) during his elucidation of juristic typologies admits that the Ḥanābila got the short end of his stick, if you will, and then explains: “While in other parts of this study the Ḥanbalite presence is felt more, it almost never matches that of the other three schools. (The relative meagerness of Ḥanbalite sources is not only a function of the small size of the school in terms of the number of followers, but a historical phenomenon that has more serious dimensions still awaiting study.)” Among those “more serious dimensions” is Ibn Ḥanbal’s “notoriously imperfect record as a jurist.”

It is indeed true that Ibn Ḥanbal’s most attractive attributes lie elsewhere, e.g. in dogmatics (ʿuṣūda, uṣūl al-dīn) and hadith; it is also true that, as a legal methodology, Ḥanbalism has had fewer takers than its rivals. What is important to note, however, and what is regularly overlooked, is that Ḥanbalism did not suffer in influence due to its legal mediocrity; on the contrary, Ḥanbalism was, for centuries, the most influential of the schools in spite of its legal shortcomings. We will explain.

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Wael Hallaq, Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xiv. See also Richard W. Bulliet, Islam: The View From the Edge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) who describes the Ḥanābila as “a local Baghdad rite with few followers elsewhere (146).”

7.3.1. Ḥanbālī Origins

It was once thought that the madḥāhib originated with their eponymous founders. Melchert quite convincingly demonstrates that the three madḥāhib of Baghdād and the Islamic East - Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanafī and Ḥanbālī - coalesced in the 10th century. Their true founders, he argues, were Ibn Surayj (d. 918), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Karkhi (d. 952), and Abū Bakr al-Khallal (d. 923) respectively and in that order. George Makdisi, using a different criterion, gives the Ḥanābila historical priority, not the Shāfi‘iya. They both concur, however, in attributing the founding of the classical Ḥanbālī school (Makdisi's guild school), as defined by their respective criteria, to al-Khallal. On the other hand, Nimrod Hurvitz de-emphasizes legal doctrine as the central factor in school formation. Rather he focuses on the circle that surround and

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Al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820), Aḥū Ḥanifa (d.767), Malik b. Anas (d. 795) and Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855).

Melchert argues that the Malikīya never functioned coherently as an organization in Baghdad where it would eventual die out. In the West, the Malikīya would incorporate the innovations of the East. *Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law*, Chapter Eight.

For Melchert the existence of a “classical school” is indicated by four criteria: the recognition of a chief scholar (ra‘ī), the production of commentaries (ta‘līqas) on legal epitomes (mukhtāsars), and the regular transmission of legal knowledge, whereby students were recognized as having completed their legal education under a specific jurist. For Makdisi, on the other hand, a school’s existence is indicated by the publication of ṭabaqāt works (biographical compendia) (“Ṭabaqāt-Biography: Law and Orthodoxy in Classical Islam,” IS 32 [1993]: 371-96). Because the first of the four law schools to publish such a work was the Ḥanabila, they are Makdisi choice for the first madhab as a legal guild (379ff.) For an examination of both views see Devin J. Stewart, “Review of Melchert, Christopher: The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law, 9th-10th Centuries C.E.,” Islamic Law and Society 6 (1999): 275-281.


pledged loyalty to Ibn Ḥanbal. Hurvitz wants to argue that “the legal, theological and moral foundations of the Ḥanbalis were laid during Ibn Ḥanbal’s life and a short while thereafter.” Moreover, “a chain of transmission of knowledge begins with Ibn Ḥanbal and continues consecutively through the next centuries. Although later generations of Ḥanbalis did a great deal to change and reshape Ḥanbali ideas and doctrine, the foundations were first put in place during the life of Ibn Ḥanbal.”

While Hurvitz’s suggestion seems plausible enough, it is rather difficult to identify those foundations from the mass of often contradictory material attributed to Ibn Ḥanbal—difficult, but perhaps not impossible. In any case, refocusing attention away from legal doctrine per se to the personal relations that constituted the master-disciple nexus is appropriate and indeed allows us to make out the contours of a micro-community that grew up around Ibn Ḥanbal, inspired by his piety, attracted to his moral outlook, and committed to the preservation of his juridical-theology, as Hurvitz argues.

7.3.2. Ḥanbalism and the Maturation of Sunnism

The failure of the Mihna would have profound significance for the future development of Islamic intellectual history in general, and Islamic theology in particular. The so-called rationalist debacle of the 3rd/9th century “marked the triumph of Traditionalism and the juridical approach over speculative theology and Rationalism.” With the consolidation of the madhāhib in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, juristic dominance over Islamic religious discourse and institutions was firmly established. The increasing professionalization of the madhāhib in the 10th and 11th centuries only

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1166 Hurvitz, Formation of Hanbalism, 15.

1167 Ibid.

1168 For a look at such an attempt to discern aspects of the “theological foundations” laid by Ibn Ḥanbal see Williams, “Aspects of the Creed of Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal.”

1169 Ḥanbali sources acknowledge 500 disciples of Ibn Ḥanbal, of which 120 adopted and transmitted his legal method. Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, Tabaqāt al-Ḥanābila, 1:7.


served to enhance the juristic monopoly of religious authority in Islam. The establishment of endowed law colleges (madāris, s. madrasa) clearly and permanently delimited participation in defining orthodoxy. The student was required to study a formal legal curriculum, a curriculum determined by the traditionalist jurists, in a regular four year law course followed by ten to twenty years of advanced graduate study in law and disputation (munāẓara). Upon completion of this study, the student received from his law professor the jāzāt al-tadrīs wa ʿiṣlā', the "license to teach law and grant legal responsa." This degree alone enabled one to participate in the elaboration of the law, and hence orthodoxy; all who lacked this credential were excluded from this process. Henceforth, "any system of thought, in order to survive, had to be affiliated with one of the schools of law. A theological system, in order to be sanctioned as legitimate, to propagate its doctrine, to provide for its perpetuation, had to be adopted by a legal system."

The madhhab thus came to serve as "the umbrella of orthodoxy, the legitimizing agency whose shelter was sought by all who coveted the stamp of legitimacy."

In order to properly assess and, as Makdisi challenged us, "elucidate the place of Hanbalite Islam in the larger history of Islamic thought," it is important to keep in mind that, unlike its rival madhhab, Hanbalism is both a law school and a theological school. That is to say, being a Hanbali was not only a commitment to a particular legal methodology, but was also a commitment to a particular theological orientation and even a set of theological principles. That orientation is often described as traditionalism, at the

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1173 See Stewart, Islamic Legal Orthodoxy, 27.


1176 Makdisi, "Hanbalite Islam," 216.

1177 ER3 4:3762 sv. Hanabila by George Makdisi.
core of which is the privileging of revealed sources over human reason (but not necessarily to the exclusion of reason\textsuperscript{1178}) in matters of law and in matters of dogma. In regards to dogma, traditionalism anchor’s all statements about God (for example) in Qur’an and hadith, even when what is found therein flies in the face of rational expectations.

Traditionalism has been associated with, and rightly so, literalism (but not necessarily fideism\textsuperscript{1179}), anthropomorphism, and determinism.\textsuperscript{1180}

The Shafi‘i, Hanafi and Malikî mabahids were law schools only, with no corresponding theologies. As such, each school played host to different theological trends. While there are exceptions, the Shafi‘i and Malikî schools tended to attract traditionalism and its opposite Ash’arism, and the Hanafi tended to attract Mu’tazilism or Maturidism.\textsuperscript{1181}

Thus, one would often find a traditionalist Shafi‘i and an Ash’arite-Shafi‘i, both agreeing on legal methodology, but quarreling vociferously over fundamental matters of theology.\textsuperscript{1182} Hanbalism, being both a law and theological school, generally avoided such factionalism. Ibn ‘Aqil (d. 1119) and Ibn al-Jawzî (d.1201) are exceptions that prove the rule.\textsuperscript{1183}


\textsuperscript{1179} Williams, “Aspects of the Creed of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal,” 445, 449f.

\textsuperscript{1180} While these three associations were likewise made by pre-Laoust-Makdisi, unfriendly studies of Hanbalism, an impartial study reveals that while the associations stand true, the negative valuations provided by those studies obscured the real nature of, say traditionalist anthropomorphism. See Williams, “Aspects of the Creed of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal.”


\textsuperscript{1183} As demonstrated by the fact that both of these Hanbali mutakallimûn were arrested and exiled by their peers. Ibn ‘Aqil was even made to sign a retraction in 465/1072 admitting his error in “frequenting the heretical innovators,” the Mu’tazila and others. See George Makdisi, Ibn ‘Aqil et la résurgence de l’Islam traditionniste au xiiie siècle (se siècle de l’Hégire) (Beirut: Institut Français de Damas, 1963) and Ibn ‘Aqil, Religion and
Ahmad b. Hanbal was the main architect of traditionalist Sunnism. As Melchert points out, during the ninth and tenth centuries “Men would assert as a badge of orthodoxy that their creed was Ahmad’s.” Examples include al-Muzani (d. 878), al-Ṭabarî (d. 923), and al-Ash’ari (d. 936). Traditionally Sunnism among the other madhhab was distinctly Ḥanbalite. This is clearly seen by examining the creeds of such non-Ḥanbalī traditionalists as Ibn Khuzayma (d. 924) and Abū Bakr al-Ājurri (d. 971), both Shāfi’is, and al-Qayrawānī (d. 996), a Mālikī. That is to say, while legal Ḥanbalism made little headway, theological Ḥanbalism won the day.

Baghdād was the cultural and intellectual center of the Muslim world long after it ceased being the political and economic center. It was the traditionalist triumph in Baghdad that guaranteed a traditionalist Sunnī orthodoxy elsewhere. And that triumph was a Ḥanbalī triumph. From its inception Ḥanbalism was a popular

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1189 See his Kitaḥ al-tavḥīd.

1189 See his al-Sharīʿa.


1192 Berkey, Formation of Islam, 186-7.

1193 Hodgson noted (Venture of Islam, 391-2): “The viewpoint of the Ḥadīth folk was launched toward general success with its victory in Baghdad.” See also Makdisi, “Remarks,” 81: “any movement aspiring to a dominant position had to prove its strength in Baghdad, cultural center of the Muslim world. And from the beginning of the (eleventh) century it was clear that Baghdad was in the firm grip of the Traditionalists,” i.e. Ḥanbalīs. Traditionalists from other centers, such as Egypt, still in the 10th-11th centuries felt the need to seek the orthodox position on a locally disputed issue from the religious scholars of Baghdad. See Berkey, Formation of Islam, 187.

movement. The mainstay of Ḥanbalī support was the 'āmma, the urban masses.\textsuperscript{1195} S. Sabri observes that, unlike the other madḥāhib, the Ḥanbaḵš expressed the views of the men and women on the streets of Baghdād, “le petit people Sunnite de Baghdād.”\textsuperscript{1196} From the time of ʿAḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself until well into the twelfth century, Ḥanbalism alone claimed the loyalty of the Baghdādī masses. And as George Makdisi non-rhetorically asked, “Who are the masses, if not orthodox?”\textsuperscript{1197} The Muʿtazī polemicist al-Ǧāḥiz (d. 869), in a treatise written probably in or around 846, bemoaned the fact that Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers (whom Jāḥiz called Nāḥīta\textsuperscript{1198}) had on their side “the masses, the pious recluse, the jurists, and the ḥadīth people,”\textsuperscript{1199} all of whom complied with Ibn Ḥanbal and his doctrine of anthropomorphism and determinism.\textsuperscript{1200} According to Ḥanbal b. ʿIṣḥāq (d. 273/866), Ibn Ḥanbal’s cousin, the latter’s trial brought a crowd so large the markets had to close.\textsuperscript{1201}

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\textsuperscript{1195} Joel L. Kramer, \textit{Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Bajīd Age}, Second Revised Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992) 60; Ephrat, \textit{A Learned Society}, 4. According to Marshall Hodgson, “After the reign of al-Mutawakkil, later in the ninth century, the more extreme representatives of this (traditionalist) approach, who called themselves Hanbalis...tended to have it their own way in the streets of Baghdad and to a lesser degree elsewhere.” \textit{Venture of Islam} 392. See also Goldziher, “They had the advantage, not only of the protection of the authoritie(s), but also the approval of the masses (Sie hatte dabei den Vorteil, nicht nur des Schutzes der Obrigkeit, sondern auch des Befalls der Massen sicher zu sein.). Goldziher, “Zur Geschichte der hanbalitischen Bewegungen,” 5; Louis Massignon, \textit{The Passion of al-Hallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam}, trr Herbert Mason, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 1:241, 247.


\textsuperscript{1197} “Hanbalite Islam,” 226.

\textsuperscript{1198} Ch. Pellat notes, “For al-Djahiz, the term applies essentially to the Hanbalis.” \textit{EF} 7:843, s.v. Nabita. See also idem, “La ‘nabīta de Djahiz,” 308.


\textsuperscript{1201} Ḥanbal b. ʿIṣḥāq, \textit{Dhikr mīnaṭ al-imām ʿAḥmad ibn Ḥanbal} (Cairo, 1977), 67.
Hanbalî dominance continued in Baghdad after the Imâm’s death. As early as 908 the Hanbalî leader al-Barbahârî (d. 941) was recognized as leader of the majority Sunnî population of Baghdad. In the struggle to overthrow the reportedly pro-Shî‘a caliphate of al-Muqtadîr in 908, Ibn al-Mu’tazz (d. 908) appealed for support to the Sunnî sensibilities of the people of Baghdad by proclaiming “Oh people, support (lit. pray for) your Sunnî, Barbahârî caliph (Tâ ma‘shur al-‘amma wa ‘l-khalîfatikum al-sunnî al-Barbahârî).” Ibn al-Athîr explains this by noting that al-Barbahârî was leader of the Hanabîla and the broader Sunnî populace (muqaddam al-hanâbîla wa ‘l-sunna min al-‘amma). As Ira M. Lapidus observed:

the (Hanbalî) scholars mobilized popular support. Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, Hanbalî preachers raised popular demonstrations for or against caliphal policy. The Hanbalis emerged as a vociferous popular party determined to enforce their own religious views. They organized groups of vigilantes, who attacked their opponents, and suppressed such immoral activities as wine drinking and prostitution.

The geographer Muqaddamî, writing around 988, observed that the majority of Baghdad was Hanbalî Sunnî, an observation made a century later by the Seljuk vizier Niẓâm al-Mulk (d. 1092). The latter, in a letter responding to the Shâﬁ‘î jurists Abû Ishâq al-Shîrâzî (d. 1083) who initially wrote to the vizier complaining about the Hanabîla, noted: al-ghâlib hanâka wa huwa madhhab al-imâm Abî ‘Abd Allâh Ahmad bin Hanbal, “The predominant madhhab here is that of Imâm Abû Allâh Ahmad b. Hanbal.”

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1202 On the Baghdadî Hanabîla see Ephrat, A Learned Society; Michael Cook, Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Wrong in Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapter Six: Mughni, “Hanbalî Movements in Baghdad”; Laoust, “Le Hanbalisme sous le califat de Bagdad.”

1203 Ibn al-Athîr, Kâmîl fi al-ta‘rîkh 7 vols. (Cairo: Idârat al-Tib’îah al-Munîfîyîah, 1929/30), 6: 121f,

1204 Ibid.


The mid-tenth/mid-eleventh century has been dubbed the “Shī‘ī Century.” Several regimes throughout the fragmented Islamic world – the Fātimids in North Africa, the Hamdanids in Mosul and Aleppo, the Qaramita in Bahrain and the Būyids in Iraq and Iran – were Shī‘ī in one sense or another. The political stability promoted by the Būyids in Baghdād and their active sponsorship of learning encouraged humanism and a “surge in intellectual energy.” This climate proved conducive to the advancement of both Mu‘tazilism and Ash‘arism. A traditionalist Sunnī “restoration,” “recentering,” or “revival” would be spearheaded, according to George Makdisi, by the Baghdādī Ḥanābīla, not the Ash‘arī-friendly Nīzām al-Mulk, Saljūk Persian Prime Minister and founder of famed Nīzāmīya college. The Ḥanbalī efforts culminated with the edicts of Caliph al-Qādir in 1017-1018 and 1029, essentially making Ḥanbalism the official position.

Makdisi argued that the Ḥanābīla were the legitimists of the caliphate, capable of prodding the caliph to act. This indeed seems true for the 10th - 12th centuries. Abū Sa‘d b. al-Baqqāl’s statement in 1048 appears to be more than just Ḥanbalī pomposity: “the caliphate is like an egg, while the Ḥanābīla are its shell; when the egg is broken, the yoke will be destroyed. The caliphate is like a tent, and the Ḥanābīla its ropes; whenever the ropes fall apart, the tent will tumble down.” When Mu‘izz al-Dawla entered Baghdād in 945, approximately 30, 900 Ḥanbalīs reportedly gathered in support of the caliph Mustakffī. His successor, al-Mu‘tī, who was enthroned by Mu‘izz al-Dawla, tried to appease the Ḥanābīla with a large sum offering for the building of a qubba over Ibn Ḥanbal’s tomb. When the caliph al-Mustaḍī (r.1170-1180) tried to strengthen his

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1208 Kraemer, Humanism.


precarious position by re-establishing ties with the Sunnī Baghdādī masses, he did so through strategic use of the Ḥanābīla.\footnote{1214} This policy apparently paid off in 1173-4 when the populace rose up, evidently inspired in some way by the preaching of Ibn al-Jawzī, and forced al-Mustaḍī’ī’s political foe, the Turkish general Qaymaz, to flee Baghdad. To show his appreciation, al-Mustaḍī’ī patronized Ḥanbalī preachers, constructed and endowed religious institutions for their use, and redecorated the shrine standing over Ibn Ḥanbal’s tomb.\footnote{1215}

7.3.3. Defenders of the Faith

The popular and, thus, political influence of the Baghdādī Ḥanābīla transformed the school from an ‘ecclesia pressa’ to an ‘ecclesia militans,’ to use Ignaz Goldziher’s terms.\footnote{1216} They would become the militant guardians – storm troopers, it might have seemed at times – of Sunnism as they were still in a position to define it. Henri Laoust described the Ḥanābīla under the Būyids as a “político-religious opposition movement.”\footnote{1217} Ḥanbalī energies in the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries were expended in two primary ways: commanding the good and opposing the heretics.\footnote{1218} In clear contrast to Ibn Ḥanbal’s preferably non-confrontational,\footnote{1219} civil,\footnote{1220} nonviolent,\footnote{1221} and apolitical\footnote{1222} execution of the command to “command the right and forbid the wrong, 

\footnote{1214} So argues Swartz, Ibn al-Jawzī’s Kīṭāb al-Quṣṣās, 32. Michael Cook is not convinced of this reading, however. See Commanding, 126 n. 90.

\footnote{1215} Ibid., 33; Laoust, “Le Hanbalisme sous le califat de Bagdad,” 113.

\footnote{1216} Goldziher, “Patton’s Ahmed ibn Hanbal and the Mihna,” 158.

\footnote{1217} Laoust, “Ḥanābīla,” 159; idem, “Le Hanbalisme sous le Califat de Baghdad,” 85ff.


\footnote{1219} If, while carrying out this duty, the offender heeds not the admonition, after two or three times the admonisher should leave. Cook, Commanding, 99.

\footnote{1220} Ibn Ḥanbal preferred that one carry out the duty against an offender with civility (rīḍ), not rudeness (ghilṣa). Cook, Commanding, 96.

\footnote{1221} Ibid, 98.

\footnote{1222} When his uncle Ḥisāq b. Ḥanbal urged him to take advantage of his involuntary presence at al-Mutawahkili’s (r. 847-61) court by commanding and forbidding the caliph, Ibn Ḥanbal refused. Cook, Commanding, 101.
ann bi'l-ma'rif wa nahy 'an al-munkar,” the muscular, politically boisterous, and confrontational Ḥanābila under al-Barbahārī carried out the command with what seems like reckless abandon. “Commanding the good” now entailed looting shops, attacking singing girls and wine sellers, raiding homes in search of wine and musical instruments, and interrogating men and women seen walking together in the street. The authorities responded by arresting Ḥanbali’s and prohibiting the gathering of any two. In a fatwā issued against them in 935 by the Mālikī grand qadi, ‘Umar Hammādī, under pressure from the pro-Shī'ī caliph al-Rādī and vizier Ibn Muqla, the Ḥanābila are threatened with “fire and sword” if they continued with their public disorder. Al-Barbahārī himself died in hiding from the authorities in 941.

In forbidding the wrong (i.e. the heretics) the Ḥanābila targeted the Shī'ā, the Mu'tazila and the Ash'arīya. These mobilizations often turned into deadly riots, particularly against the Shi'a. In 929 the Ḥanbali's rioted against a group wanting to interpret Sura 17:79 (“...maybe your Lord will raise you to an exalted place”) metaphorically, instead of how it is “supposed” to be read, as an indication that God will sit the Prophet on his throne next to him. Many people were killed. In the month of Jumāda 1-Ākhira 935 the police chief, Badr al-Kharshānī attempted to seize al-Barbahārī who escaped. As a protest, the Ḥanābila set on fire the Khakh Quarter, Baghdad’s Shī'ī stronghold. In Jumāda 1-Ūlā 959, riots broke out resulting in many deaths and the burning of Bab al-Ṭāq, another Shī'ī quarter. And in 974, in response to the Shī'ī commemoration of ʿĀshūrā, the Ḥanbali-lead Sunnis paraded a woman around on camel, ʿĀ'isha-like, accompanied by two men representing Talḥa and al-Zubayr; the

1223 Michael Cook, in his magisterial study of the command and its function in Islamic thought, has provided the most detailed look at the command in Ḥanablī thought: Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Wrong in Islamic Thought.

1224 Cook, Commanding, 116ff.

1225 EFF 1:1040 s.v. al-Barbahārī by H. Laoust

1226 On the riots cited here see Mughni, “Ḥanbali Movements,” Chapter 3; Laoust, “Les agitations religieuses à Baghdad.”

1227 Mughni, “Ḥanbali Movements,” 162.
three shouted, "We fight against 'Alt." A riot broke out, killing many, and the Karkh Quarter was again burned down.\textsuperscript{1228}

These anecdotes can be multiplied, endlessly it seems. As Michael Cook noted in a slightly different context, "there could hardly be a more poignant contrast" to Ibn Ḥanbal’s quietism.\textsuperscript{1229} Between the ninth and tenth centuries, Ḥanbalism had undergone a significant change. But this could hardly be due to an evolution from “a sectarian ghetto into the mainstream of Muslim life," as Cook speculates.\textsuperscript{1230} As we saw, (proto-)Ḥanbalism never existed in a 'sectarian ghetto' in Baghdād. It was a popular movement commanding the allegiance of the broad masses of Baghdādī (proto-)Sunnis from its inception.\textsuperscript{1231} More plausible is Cook’s suggestion that the political weakness of the 'Abbāsid caliphate in the face of the Būyids and Seljuks resulted in a great loss of respect on the Ḥanbalīs part toward the government, while on the other hand that same government made its dependence of the Ḥanbalīs for political strength clear. It is not hard to see how the Ḥanbalīs could grow more arrogant, more boisterous, and more fearless in the face of the government.\textsuperscript{1232} Add to this the fact that the Būyids were Shīʿī, which ever their persuasion, and thus gave support and confidence (even arrogance) to the local Shīʿa, a situation well-nigh certain to trigger that Ḥanbali steadfastness that under the political circumstances can transmute into aggression.

7.3.4. \textit{Al-Ru'ya and the Sunni 'Aqīda}

The Sunnism that the Ḥanābila so vigilantly, and often violently, guarded included the affirmation of Muḥammad’s vision of God. Traditionalist manuals of the 9\textsuperscript{th} - 11\textsuperscript{th} century

\textsuperscript{1228} Ibid., 171.

\textsuperscript{1229} Cook, \textit{Commanding}, 117.

\textsuperscript{1230} Ibid., 141.

\textsuperscript{1231} According to Marshall Hodgson, “After the reign of al-Mutawakkil, later in the ninth century, the more extreme representatives of this (traditionalist) approach, who called themselves Hanbalis...tended to have it their own way in the streets of Baghdad and to a lesser degree elsewhere.” \textit{Vesture of Islam} 392. See also Goldziher, “They had the advantage, not only of the protection of the authorities, but also the approval of the masses (Sie hatte dabei den Vorteil, nicht nur des Schutzes der Obrigkeit, sondern auch des Beifalls der Massen sicher zu sein.), Goldziher, “Zur Geschichte der Ḥanbilīschen Bewegungen,” 5; Massignon, \textit{Passion of al-Hallāj}, 1: 241, 247;

\textsuperscript{1232} Cook, \textit{Commanding}, 122f.
centuries frequently included sections affirming the Vision. Al-Dāraqutnī (d. 995), considered the greatest tradionalists of his time, concluded his important work, Kitāb al-Ru'ya ("Book Treating Visio Dei"), with a chapter treating "the ḥadīth reports about the Prophet’s (s) seeing his Lord, Blessed and Most High, in this world," a chapter consisting of some 60 reports. The prominent Hanbali leaders, following Ibn Ḥanbal’s example, included Muḥammad’s vision of God in their creed: al-Barbarharī (d. 941), Ibn Baṭṭa (d. 997), Ibn Ḥāmid (d. 1012), and al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā (d. 1065). As we saw above with the reported exchange between the muḥaddith Abū Qurrah and the Shīf Ḥāmid ‘Alī al-Riḍā, the Baghdādī Sunnism of the period was characterized, and caricatured, by its affirmation of Muḥammad’s vision of God. It was not just the Ḥanbalī ‘ulamā’ who affirmed the Vision. The Shāfi‘ite muḥaddith Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Khuzayma (d. 924), called the chief of the Khurasani traditionalists, concluded his 33 page, typically tradionalist discussion/defense of the Prophet’s Vision affirming that "the

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1233 Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dārīmī (d. 869), al-Sunna 1:606 [bāb fi niyyat ‘al-rahb tālā fi ‘l-naum ("Section treating seeing the Lord Most High while asleep"). This section includes two reports: the ḥadīth aḥsan suṣta on the authority of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Āšīh (#2149) and a ḥadīth on the authority of Ibn Șīrān declaring that whoever sees his Lord in his sleep will enter Paradise (#2150); Ibn Abī ʾĀṣim (d. 900), al-Sunna, 1:306ff [bāb dhāhri min niyyat al-nabī (s) rabbih tālā ("Section mentioning the Prophet’s (s) vision of his Lord Most High"); Ibn Khuzayma (d. 924), Kitāb al-Taʿlīḥ, 197ff [bāb dhāhri al-akābīr al-maʿthirat fi ʾisbāb niyyat al-nabī (s) (s)] khatāṣhi al-ʾAṣīz al-Aʿlīm ("Section mentioning the transmitted reports regarding the affirmation of the Prophet’s (s) vision of his Creator, the Powerful, the All-knowing..."); al-ʿAjurī (d. 971), al-Sharfī, 2:314ff [bāb dhāhri mā khasṣṣ Allāh ‘AZza wa jallā bihi ‘l-nabī (s) min al-naa (s) thiṣabb bi ‘AZza wa jallā ("Section mentioning that by which God, May He be Exalted and Great, distinguished the Prophet (s): the Vision of his Lord, May He be Exalted and Great"); al-ʿAlākāṭī (d. 148/1027), Shahr, 2:512ff [sīyāq mā rāwīya ‘an al- nabī (s) anhu qad raʾal-rabbahu ("Sequence of reports about the Prophet (s) that he indeed saw his Lord").

1234 Pages 308-359.

1235 Shahr biṭāḥ al-sunna, qutub ıbn Abī Yaʿlā, Tabaqāt.

1236 Al-Ibāna, ed. trns by Henry Laoust La Profession de foi d’Ibn Bat’a (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1958), 104. Ubayd Allāh b. Baṭṭa was “the outstanding Hanbali ideologist of the period” and his al-Ibāna “a definitive statement of contemporary Hanbali ideology.” See also Laoust, Ibn Baṭṭa, Introduction, xlii-xlvi.


1238 Kitāb al-Mutammad fi wṣul al-dīn, 84ff. On him see below.

1239 See above.
mandate of the way of knowledge and jurisprudence is acceptance” of Muḥammad’s vision of God.1240

Some of the main representatives of tenth-century Sunnī Kalām likewise affirmed the Vision. Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944) cited the Vision in his Kitāb al-tawḥīd, though he deanthropomorphised it.1241 Al-Ashʿarī (d. 935), whose traditionalism was too diluted by his indulgence in kalām to be accepted by the traditionalists,1242 yet took a position on the issue which was in complete agreement with that of the conservative ahl al-hadīth: Ibn ʿAbbās’s affirmation is preferred over ʿAʾisha’s denial. Al-Ashʿarī advances as proof of the Mother of the Faithful’s error a theophanic interpretation of surat al-Najm as well as hadīth al-shābb.1243

7.3.4.1. Sunnism’s Youthful Deity

The main representatives of tenth-century traditionalist Sunnism and Sunnī Kalām, with all of the well-known acrimony between the two groups, agreed on this point: Muḥammad saw his Lord. To be sure, there were differences across and within the groups over how the Vision was understood, whether as a dream-vision (vision of the heart) or as a waking-vision. But whichever choice one opted for, the general sentiment among these “affirmers” was that it was a real visual encounter.1244 Traditionalist Sunnism was specifically associated with and self-identified with Muḥammad’s reported encounter with the divine shābb. Ibn Ḥanbal and other ninth-century traditionalists made affirming this Vision a criterion of faith and thus the movement they represented was frequently characterized/caricaturized by belief in this youthful deity.1245 This association

1240 Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-tawḥīd, 227.

1241 Al-Māturīdī, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, 80.


1243 Al- Ashʿarī cites the report from Umm al-Ṭufayl, “I heard one day the Messenger of Allah say that he had seen his Lord, during his sleep, under the most beautiful form, a young man with long hair (mussafir)...” See Ibn Fūrak Muğarrad maqālāt al-Ashʿarī, 86ff. Daniel Gimaret, La Doctrine d’Al-Ashʿarī (Paris: Patrimoines, 1990), 342ff.

1244 See below.

1245 See above.
continued throughout the 10th and 11th centuries. The rescript of the Shi‘a friendly Caliph al-Ra‘dī issued in 935 against the Baghdādi Ḥanbalis condemns them for anthropomorphist views based on hadith al-shābb.

You claim that your ugly and disgusting faces are in the image of the Lord of the worlds and that your vile appearance is in His image; you talk of His feet and fingers and legs and gilded shoes and curly hair, and going up to heaven and coming down to the world-may God be raised above what wrongdoers and unbelievers say about Him.\textsuperscript{1246}

The “curly hair,” ja‘d, and gilded shoes are clearly those of the youthful deity found in the various ahādīth al-shābb. This polemical (Shī‘) association of Baghdādi Sunnism with the youthful deity is encountered again in the polemic of the Imāmī al-Hillī (d. 1325) against the hashwīya and other mushabbiha (‘likeners’/anthropomorphists). He claimed that “some of them (al-hashwīya) believe that God descends every Thursday night in the form of a beardless youth, beautiful of face, on a camel, until some of them in Baghdād place fodder on the roof of their house every Thursday night (hoping) that God will descend on His camel on that roof.”\textsuperscript{1247} Al-Hillī goes on to relate another rather scandalous narrative about a sheikh of the hashwīya in Baghdād who passes a naffāt (lowly tar thrower) “who had with him a young, beardless boy, handsome of form, with curly hair just as they describe their Lord.” The narrative continues:

The sheikh stared at [the boy]. The naffāt thought of him [that night] and came to him and said: “Ya sheikh! I noticed you staring at this young boy so I have come to you with him. If you have an intention with him, you are the judge.” The sheikh got angry at him and said: “Rather, I stared at him because I believe that Allah descends in [that form] so I thought he was God.” The naffāt said: “I am in naffāt better than you in your asceticism with this talk.”\textsuperscript{1248}

The Mu‘tazīlī al-Qādī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) noted that, still in the 11th century the common people inclined towards anthropomorphism (qulub al-‘āmma lā tashiqu illā ilā mā tasawwiruhu) based on hadith al-shābb.\textsuperscript{1249} While we may be tempted to dismiss these tales as


\textsuperscript{1247} Al-Hillī, Minhāj al-karama, apud Ibn Taymiyya, Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawīya (Cairo, 1964), 2:506.

\textsuperscript{1248} Al-Hillī, Minhāj al-karama, apud Ibn Taymiyya, Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawīya, 2: 507.

\textsuperscript{1249} Al-Qādī Abd al-Jabbār, Fadh al-i‘tīzāl wa-tabaqāt al-Mu‘tazila (ed. Fu‘ād Sayyid; Tunis, 1393/1974), 149.
Shī‘ī/Mu‘tazīlī propaganda, Sunnism’s courtship with the divine shābb is confirmed from Sunni sources.

7.3.4.2. The Affair of al-Qādir Abū Ya’lā

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. al-Farrā’ (990-1066), better known as al-Qādir Abū Ya’lā, was undoubtedly ‘the major leader and prime mover of the Hanbalite movement’ in his day and clearly a leading influence on Ḥanbalism/Sunnism for a good part of the eleventh century. As recognized imām of the Baghdādī Ḥanābila al-Qādir Abū Ya’lā was well respected by the pro-Sunnī caliphs al-Qādir (r. 991-1031) and al-Qā’im (r. 1031-1075). The latter beseeched him repeatedly to be chief judge (qādir) of the caliphal palace, a post Abū Ya’lā reluctantly assumed. Abū Ya’lā the theologian is said to have had a recognizable influence on the Caliph al-Qā’im, a claim supported by the Caliph’s handling of the ‘affair of al-Qādir Abū Ya’lā.’

The ‘affair of al-Qādir Abū Ya’lā’ can be said to have begun with the publication of his now lost Iḥtāl al-ta’wilat li-akhbār al-sifāt (“The Invalidation of the Metaphorical Interpretations of the Reports on the Divine Attributes”) circa 1040. The outcry from the local Shāfī‘i-Ashʿarī’s who condemned the book as “pure anthropomorphism” reached the Caliph who requested the writing from Abū Ya’lā. After reading it himself the Caliph returned the book with an endorsing “thank you.” Shortly thereafter the Caliph summoned the city’s ‘ulamā’ and witness notaries to his palace where he proclaimed the traditionalist Qadiri Creed (I’tiqād Qādirī), the doctrinal proclamation of his father. The gathered notables had to sign the proclamation. The Qadiri Creed proclaimed by Caliph al-Qā’im is apparently an epitome of the several edicts promulgated by his father, Caliph al-Qādir, between 1017 and 1029. This creed has been likened to the creeds of


1253 On these edicts see Makdisi, Ibn ‘Aqīl, 3-9.
the two Ḥanbalī leaders contemporary with the two caliphs, Ibn Baṭṭa (d. 997) and al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā (d. 1065). Makdisi thus called it a traditionalist-Ḥanbalī profession of faith, its proclamation making Ḥanbalism “the ‘official credo’ of the state.”

The gathering in 1040 called by Caliph al-Qā’im likely had the purpose of putting an end to the controversy over Abū Ya’lā’s book on the Divine Attributes. Part of the proclamation reads: “Only those Attributes should be ascribed to Him which He has Himself ascribed or his Prophet has ascribed to Him. Further, each Attribute He or the Prophet have ascribed to Him is a real attribute (ṣīfa ḥaqiqīyya), not metaphorical (la majāzīyya).” Wadi Haddad’s suggestion that the proclamation of Caliph al-Qā’im was a “vindication of Abū Ya’lā’s doctrine and an exoneration of him,” has support from the Arabic sources. According to Ibn Abī Ya’lā the ascetic shaykh Ibn al-Qazwinī (d. 1050) looked at Abū Ya’lā after the signing of the proclamation and said, “Just as your soul desired.” The Qāḍī responded: “Praise be to God for his graciousness in manifesting the truth.” Ibn al-Qazwinī then said to the Qāḍī: “I shall not be satisfied until I go to the Manṣūr Mosque and dictate the reports of the Divine Attributes.” The ascetic shaykh fulfilled his word and went to mosque each Friday dictating akhbars al-sifāt in support of Abū Ya’lā.

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1234 According to Laoust, Ibn Battà, xcvi, xcvi the principles of the Qādirī Creed were essentially identical with those of Ibn Baṭṭa. Haddad (Kitāb al-Mu’tamadh, 26), on the other hand, identifies the Creed as “the doctrine of Abū Ya’lā.” The Qāḍī’s son, Ibn Abī Ya’lā, already identified the Creed with the essence of his father’s creed. Ṭabaqāt, 2:197-8.

1235 Makdisi, Ibn ‘Aqīl et la résurgence, 308.


1237 Haddad, “Al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā,” 87.


1239 Haddad, “Al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā,” 87.


1241 Ibn Abī Ya’lā, Ṭabaqāt, 2:198.

1242 The main Sunnī cathedral mosque in West Baghdad.

What was the Qāḍī’s doctrine of the Sīfāt that was made part of the ‘official credo of the state’? Ibn Taymīya (d. 1328) provides one of the few excerpts from Abū Ya’lā’s lost Ibtāl in his Majmū‘ at al-rasā‘îl al-kubrā. The Qāḍī declares:

The traditions (concerning the Divine Attributes) cannot be rejected, nor can one be preoccupied with their metaphorical interpretation. They must be taken literally (‘alā zāhirihā) and that they are the Attributes of God. They are not to be likened to the same attributes in creation.\textsuperscript{1264}

What are some of these Sīfāt that must be taken literally? In his critique of Ḥanbalī anthropomorphism - a critique that often targeted Abū Ya’lā himself - Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) quotes the Qāḍī from an unidentified work that Merlin Swartz’s believes is likely the Ibtāl.\textsuperscript{1265} In one of those quotes the Qāḍī identifies some of these Divine Attributes:

Terms such as ‘young man’ (shābb), ‘beardless’ (amrad), ‘short, curly’ (ja‘ad wa qatā‘), ‘moths’ (fīrāsh)\textsuperscript{1266} ‘sandals’ (ma‘lān)\textsuperscript{1267} and ‘crown’ (tāj)\textsuperscript{1268} have all been established as designations that apply to God, although we do not claim to know their precise meaning [when used for this purpose].\textsuperscript{1269}

All of these “established” Attributes come from Vision reports, specifically aḥādīth al-shābb or reports of the Divine Youth. In his Kitāb al-Mu‘tamad fi uṣūl al-Dīn Abū Ya’lā affirms that Muḥammad saw God with his eyes during his Nocturnal Journey and with his heart (i.e. in a dream-vision) on some other occasion.\textsuperscript{1270} The most beautiful form, sūra, seen by Muḥammad in his vision was God’s real form, though a form unlike

\textsuperscript{1264} Ibn Taymīya, Majmū‘ at al-rasā‘îl al-kubrā (Cairo: al-Sharāfiyya, 1905) 1:145.

\textsuperscript{1265} A Medieval Critique, 136.

\textsuperscript{1266} From the hādīth al-shābb on the authority of Umm Ṭufayl reading fīrāsh min dhahab, ‘moths of gold’ over the youthful god’s face rather than fīrāsh min dhahab, “veil of gold.”

\textsuperscript{1267} The youthful God of hādīth al-shābb on the authority of Umm Ṭufayl wears sandals of gold.


\textsuperscript{1269} Ibn al-Jawzī, Kitāb Akhbār al-Sīfāt, 49 (Eng. 183).

\textsuperscript{1270} Al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā, Kitāb al-Mu‘tamad fi uṣūl al-Dīn, 151.
forms. The Qāḍī cites the *hadīth al shābb* on the authority of Umm al-Ṭufayl as proof that God can be seen in a dream-vision.

Wadi Haddad has argued that al-Qāʾim’s proclamation of the Qādirī Creed and his support of Abū Yaʾlā in this controversy “reveal the creedal position of the Caliph”. Christopher Melchert and Steven Judd have both likewise argued that the doctrinal tendency a particular Caliph promoted can be discerned by examining the tendencies of the men he appointed to be judges (*qādīs*). The official support given to traditionalist Sunnism (Hanbalism) by the two caliphs al-Qādir and al-Qāʾim in general and the latter’s support for al-Qāḍī Abū Yaʾlā in particular suggests therefore that both popular Sunnism and state-sponsored Sunnism during the later part of the tenth and much of the eleventh century was a Sunnism that affirmed that the Prophet saw God, and he saw him in the most beautiful form of a young man.

7.4. ‘Ā’isha’s Denial and Sunnism’s Affirmation

Sunnism between the ninth-eleventh centuries, generally speaking, affirmed Muhammad’s vision of God. This is not to suggest that thereafter the Vision dropped out of the Sunnī profession of faith. Al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111) in the twelfth century begrudgingly conceded that, in spite of his objections, “most ‘ulamāʾ are of the opinion that he saw Him” and al-Nawawī (d. 1277) in the thirteenth century could still claim as well that “the preferred view (*al-rāijīh*) with most of the ‘ulamāʾ is that the Messenger of God saw his Lord with the eyes of his head on the Night of Isrā’.” This begs the question: how

1271 Ibid., 58.

1272 Haddad, “Al-Qāḍī Abū Yaʾlā,” 90.


1274 The *aḥsan sport* or ‘most beautiful form’ is explicitly identified as the form of the young man, *shāhīb*, in the reports on the authority of Umm al-Ṭufayl and Anas b. Mālik. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-mawḥūd*, 181; al-Dāraquṭnī, *Kitāb al-Ruʿya*, 356-7 # 265.

1275 *Ilyā‘ulūm al-dīn* 4:268

could the Vision have become such an important, even at times defining, aspect of the Sunnī 'aqīda in the face of the vehement denial from one of the pillars of Sunnism and the ‘Beloved of Muḥammad?’ Traditionalist treatment of ‘Ā’isha’s denial varied. ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-Dārimī (d. 895) did “totally reject” the ḥadīth al-shābī from Ibn ‘Abbās because it is opposed by the reports Abū Dārr (“Light! How could I have seen Him?”) and ‘Ā’isha, but his “total rejection” was of a physical vision only. Muḥammad did see God in a most beautiful form in his (Muḥammad’s) sleep. On the other hand, Ibn Taymiyya claimed that the “people of knowledge” reject as lies this narration from ‘Ā’isha along with a similar report claiming that her father Abū Bakr likewise asked the Prophet and he said “I saw Him.” The only one to have asked the Prophet if he had seen God, Ibn Taymiyya claims, was Abū Dharr. Like al-Dārimī before him Ibn Taymiyya denied that the Prophet saw God during the Mi‘rāj with his eyes. He did, however, see God later in Medina in a dream-vision.

Generally speaking the traditionalists did not go as far as Ibn Taymiyya in rejecting the ‘Ā’isha-report as a lie. They did, however, marginalize it, despite the fact that al-Bukhārī has ‘Ā’isha pronounce the ‘orthodox’ position. The Mother of the Faithful was generally dismissed in favor of Ibn ‘Abbās on this issue. ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Ḥammām

1277 Aisha Geissinger, “The Exegetical Traditions of ‘Ā’isha: Notes on their Impact and Significance,” JQS 6 (2004): 1-20 attributes this marginalization of ‘Ā’isha’s denial to a “number of complex reasons” including mystical and theological concerns, the dynamics of interfaith polemic, popular sentiment, and gender issues (12-13).

1278 Al-Dārimī, Naqd, 2: 726.

1279 Al-Dārimī, Naqd, 2:726; idem, al-Radd, 53.

1280 Al-Dārimī, Naqd, 2:738, quoting the ḥadīth aḥsan sīra on the authority of Thawbān. To those mutakallimin (speculative theologians) who tried to de-anthropomorphize the report by various interpretations such as the “most beautiful form” refers to a created form used by God to communicate to his Prophet, or even the form of an angel in which God inheres, al-Dārimī pronounces: “Woe to you! It is not possible that this is Jibrīl, or Mīkā‘ī, or Isrā‘īl; it is not possible that this (form) is other than Allāh.” Naqd, 2:237.

1281 Ibn Taymiyya, Misbāh al-sunna al-nabawīyya, 2: 511.

1282 Ibn Taymiyya, Risāla fi mur’ayt al-nabi‘ rabbahu, MS 13895, Maktabat al-Asad al-Wātaniyya, Damascus, fol. 7 v: “This hadith (aḥsan sīra) and those like it are all a dream vision that took place in Medina after the Ascension. As for the known reports of the Ascension, nothing in them contains anything that mentions a certified vision of him.” See also Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Zad al-ma‘ād, 3:28-29.


1284 Ibid.; al-Bukhārī, Sahih, tafsīr, #378.
(d. 826) mentioned the hadith of ‘Ā’isha’s denial to Ma’mar b. Rāshid (d. 770), the famous Yemenite mukaddith, who said, “‘Ā’isha is not with us more knowledgeable (in this matter) than Ibn ‘Abbās.”1285 Al-Marrūdī reported concerning Ibn Hanbal:

I said to Ahmad: “Some say that ‘Ā’isha said ‘Whoever claims that Muhammad saw his Lord lies greatly against God!’ How should we respond?” (Ahmad) said: “With the words of the Prophet, ‘I saw my Lord.’ His words are greater than hers.”1286

Here ‘Ā’isha is not just juxtaposed – to her detriment – to the Interpreter of the Qur’ān Ibn ‘Abbās. Her words are set in direct conflict with those of the Prophet himself. The way Al-Marrūdī posed the question to Ibn Hanbal may suggest doubt regarding the authenticity of the report: not “‘Ā’isha said so and so” but “Some say that ‘Ā’isha said so and so.” Al-Ash’arī rejected ‘Ā’isha’s denial in favor of Ibn ‘Abbās’s and Umm al-Ṭufayl’s affirmation.1287 So too did Ibn Khuzayma, who wrote regarding ‘Ā’isha’s vehement denial:

This statement, I reckon ‘Ā’isha uttered it during a moment of anger… It is not proper in articulation that a speaker, male or female, says: “Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Dhar, Anas b. Mālik, and a group from among the people made great against their Lord lies.” But in anger one utters expressions that are not as comely and beautiful as other (utterances). The most that can be said is that ‘Ā’isha, Abū Dhar, Ibn ‘Abbās and Anas b. Mālik disagreed: Did the Prophet see his Lord? ‘Ā’isha said he did not, while Abū Dhar and Ibn ‘Abbās said he did see his Lord…. ‘Ā’isha did not report from the Prophet (s) that he informed her that he did not see his Lord, May He be Exalted and Great. She simply recited His words, “Visions comprehend Him not” and “It is not for man that Allah speaks to him except (through) revelation.” (But) from the contemplation of these two verses and in accordance with attainment of the “Right,” it is known that there is not in either of the two verses that which merits charging one who said that Muhammad saw his Lord with lying against Allah…. We say just as Ma’mar b. Rāshid said when the disagreement of ‘Ā’isha and Ibn ‘Abbās was mentioned: “In this matter ‘Ā’isha is not with us more knowledgeable than Ibn ‘Abbās.” We say: ‘Ā’isha is the truthful, daughter of the truthful, the beloved of Allah’s beloved; a scholar and jurist. Likewise Ibn ‘Abbās is the cousin of the Prophet who supplicated to Allah for him that He bestows wisdom and knowledge (on Ibn ‘Abbās). For this reason he is named the Qur’ān’s Interpreter.1288 Al-Fārūq used to ask him about some of the meanings of the Qur’ān (verses) and yielded to him even if


1286 Al-Khallal, Kitāb al-Sunnah, apud Ibn Ḥajar, Fath al-Bārī, 8:608-9; Andrea, Dei Person, 75 (who quotes Abū Mansūr al-Baghdādī, Kitāb al-Sunnah, apud al-QāḍīAllāhī, al-Mawāzhid al-ṭahāniyya bi ʾl-minah al-Muḥammadīyya).

1287 Ibn Fūrak Mujarrad maqālāt al-Ash’arī, 342.

1288 Lit: “This meaning is from the supplication while he is named the Qur’ān’s Interpreter.”
others disagreed with him who were older than he and more senior in companionship to the Prophet. When the two disagree, it is inconceivable that one says Ibn 'Abbās made great against Allah lies (simply) because he affirmed something which 'Ā'ishā denied… the Tribe of Hāshim, collectively, contradict 'Ā'ishā (m) in this matter and they, all of them, used to affirm that the Prophet (s) saw his Lord twice. The agreement of the Tribe of Hāshim is…more appropriate than 'Ā'ishā’s isolated statement. Companions who are known did not follow her, nor did any woman from the wives/women of the Prophet, nor any of the female Successors.1299

I quote Ibn Khuzayma at length because these comments from such a staunch Sunnī and 'chief of the traditionalists' regarding such an important early figure for Sunnism seem rather remarkable. Again, the affirmation of Ibn 'Abbās, Abū Dhar, Anas b. Mālik and the Tribe of Hāshim collectively is preferred to 'Ā'ishā’s isolated and rather emotional denial and her inappropriate charge against those with whom she disagrees. 'Ā'ishā’s denial, Ibn Khuzayma claims, is not based on a denial relayed to her from the Prophet; it is based on her own incorrect interpretation of certain relevant passages from the Qur’an. Her tafsīr can not impeach that of Turjumān al-Qurʾān himself, Ibn ‘Abbās; at least not here since his tafsīr is supported by a prophetic statement. We learn from al-Nawawī that this sentiment was still alive in the twelfth century.

(Ibn ‘Abbās and others) affirm (the Vision) only due to the narrations (bi 'l-sama') from the Messenger of God. This is from that (type of knowledge) which to doubt it is improper. 'Ā'ishā (r) did not deny the Vision with a transmission from the Messenger of God; if she had such a transmission she would have mentioned it. (Instead she relied on the apparent meaning of [the qur’ānic passages]. Other Companions disagree with her.1299

The popularity of this sentiment must be the answer to the question posed above: the Vision became an important aspect of Sunnī doctrine despite 'Ā'ishā’s vehement denial because 'Ā'ishā’s qualifications in the matter were subordinated to those of Ibn ‘Abbās. Certainly her years as ‘Favorite Wife’ of Muḥammad privileged 'Ā'ishā’s insight and qualified her as an important witness to and, thus, source of tradition. But she doesn’t here transmit an explicit denial from the Prophet, it is argued. Rather, she does tafsīr. But

1299 Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-tauhīd, 225ff.

1299 Al-Nawawī, Shāhīs Muslim, 2:11 (=Ibn Ḥajar, al-Fath al-Bārī, 8:607).
‘Ā’isha the mutassina could not rival the Turjumān al-Qur’ān, at least not on this issue.\footnote{1291}

7.5. Ru’ya bi ‘l-qalb and Traditionalist Sunnism

For Sunnī commentators like al-Qurṭubi (d. 1272), M. Chodkiewicz tells us, “La question...n’est pas de savoir si le Prophète a vu Dieu mais de savoir comment il L’a vu: bi-l-
basar aw bi-l-‘aṣy qalbihi?”\footnote{1292} No consensus developed on this issue. Al-Nawawī claimed that the “preponderant view” with “most of the ‘ulamā’” is that the Prophet saw God with his eyes during his Night Journey. This was the position of Qāḍī ʿIyād (d. 1149)\footnote{1293} and al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā (d. 1065),\footnote{1294} and the mystic Sheik of Shirāz Ibn Khāṭīb (d. 982) affirmed the same.\footnote{1295} On the other hand al-Lālakārī (d. 1027),\footnote{1296} al-Māturīdī (d. 944),\footnote{1297} al-Ashʿarī (d. 935),\footnote{1298} al-Dārimī (d. 895),\footnote{1299} and others affirmed a ruʿya bi ‘l-qalb. Van Ess suggests that the Sunnī affirmation of a ‘vision of the heart’ resulted from a growing anti-anthropomorphist sentiment.\footnote{1300} With this affirmation, van Ess claims, “die Vision wurde damit zu einer bloßen Vorstellung reduziert.”\footnote{1301} Daniel Gimaret too treats the “Vision of the heart” as a “metaphorical” seeing.\footnote{1302} The sources support these claims but with qualification.


\footnote{1292} “It is not a question to know if the Prophet saw God but to know how did he see Him: with the eyes of his head or the eyes of his heart.” “La vision de Dieu selon Ibn ‘Arabi,” 160.

\footnote{1293} Al-Shīfa, 101.

\footnote{1294} Kitāb al-Mu’tamad, 151.


\footnote{1296} Shahr, 2:512f.

\footnote{1297} Kitāb al-Tawhīd, 30.

\footnote{1298} Ibn Fūrak Mujarrad maqāllāt al-Ashʿarī, 342ff.

\footnote{1299} Naqd, 2:738.


\footnote{1301} “the Vision was thereby reduced to a bare idea.” Van Ess, TG 4:390.

\footnote{1302} *EF* 8:644 s.v. Ruʿyat Allāh.
The metaphorical reading of "vision of the heart" as 'knowledge' was characteristic of the Mu'tazili anti-anthropomorphist theology and this school may have originated the reading. Al-Ash'arî, the Mu'tazili-turned-Sunnî mutakallim, acknowledged this 'cognitive' sense of vision of the heart in his debate with his former colleagues over the meaning of surat al-An'âm [6]: 103. But Al-Ash'arî tells us that the Prophet really saw God in a dream-visions, as narrated in the reports from Umm al-Ţufayl and Ibn 'Abbâs. This was a true vision (ru'yah haqiqah) not a dream delusion (takhayyûl). It is this vision of the heart as 'true dream-visions' that traditionalist Sunnîsm affirmed for Muḥammad, not the metaphorical, cognitive ru'yah bi 'l-qalb. And as van Ess would admit regarding the Sunnî perspective on ru'yah bi 'l-baṣîr vs. ru'yah bi 'l-qalb: "Aber vermutlich betonen wir den Unterschied schärfer, als man dies damals tat." When asked concerning this matter, Ibn Ḥanbal responded: "Yes, he saw Him in reality (râ'hu haqqah), for the visions of the prophets are real." "My eyes sleep" the Prophet is given to say, "but my heart does not sleep." The heart, we recall, is the locus of comprehension and thus of true vision. Consequently "That which the Prophet sees in his sleep and while awake, it is

103 Tuft, "Ru'yah Controversy," 94, 168; Subhan, "Mu'tazilite View on Beatific Vision," 423; Albert N. Nader, Le système philosophique des Mu'tazîlites (Premiers Penseurs de l'Islam) (Beirut: Les Lettres Orientales, 1956) 115. Van Ess, Flowering of Muslim Theology, 31 notes regarding this school: "The doctrines they hated most were anthropomorphism and predestinaâon."

104 Tuft, "Ru'yah Controversy," 168, 94 suggested that the intuitive sense of ru'yat al-qalb and even the expression itself was innovated by the Mu'tazil Abu Hudhayl (d. 840) who said for example: "We shall see God with our minds eye, i.e. we shall know Him through our hearts." Al-Ash'arî, Maqalât, 1:157, 216.

105 Al-Ìbâna, 63-65. See also Tuft's discussion, "Origins and Development," 91-92.

106 Ibn Fūrak, Mujarrad maqalât al-Ash'ârî, 86.


108 TG 4:391: "But presumably we emphasize a sharper difference than they did at the time."


110 Ibn Sa'd, Kitâb al-Tabaqât al-Kabîr, 1:197.

111 See above.
truth.” Qaḍi ‘Iyād claimed that there was no difference of opinion regarding the vision of God in the sleep. It occurs and it is true, because Satan cannot take the form of God.

For others, the Prophet wasn’t necessarily asleep during the Vision but his heart was temporarily equipped with sight, making his vision of God just as real as a physical vision. As Abū ﻿#-Hāsan al-Wāhidī (d. 1075) stated:

‘He (Muḥammad) saw his Lord with his heart’ is a sound vision (nuʿya saḥīha) and it is that Allah Most High placed [Muhammad’s] eyes in his heart or created for his heart eyes so that [his seeing] his Lord is sound just as he saw with his eyes.

Al-Ḍahḥāk reported from Ibn ‘Abbās that Muḥammad said, “I looked at Him with my heart until I was sure that He was present and that I really saw Him.” Though the heart was the instrument of the vision, Muhammad “really saw Him.” The point of all this is the reality of the vision, despite its having occurred in a dream-vision or in any case without the instrumentality of the Prophet’s eyes; otherwise the popular tradition of Muḥammad’s superiority over Abraham and Moses by virtue of the Vision would lose all force. This is consistent with the ANE/biblical tradition of dream theophanies.

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1312 Ibn ‘Abī ‘Āsim, al-Sawā, 1:325, #473. See also Ibn Ishāq, Sīra (183 Eng.): “I heard that the Apostle used to say: ‘My eyes sleep while my heart is awake.’ Only God knows how revelation came and he saw what he saw. But whether he was asleep or awake, it was all true and actually happened.”

1313 See Kinberg, “Literal Dreams,” 286 n. 18. According to a ḥadīth found in Muslim (Ṣaḥīḥ, #4200) “Those of you with the truest dreams will be those who are most truthful in speech.” Thus the Prophet’s dream visions, even of God, are most truthful. See above n. 859. See also Ibn Taymīya’s comments: “A Believer may see his Lord in a dream, in various forms according to his faith and belief. If his faith is correct he can only see Him in a beautiful form and if his faith is lacking, this will be reflected in the way he sees Him. Seeing Allah in a dream is not like seeing Him in reality. It may have different interpretations and meanings referring to something in reality...Whoever sees Allah in a dream sees Him in a form that corresponds to his own state. If he is righteous, he will see Him in a beautiful form, which is why the Prophet of Allah (s) saw Him in the most beautiful form.” Al-Fatāwa, 3:390, 5:251. The complete righteousness of the Prophet would therefore guarantee the truthfulness of the dream-theophany.

1314 Quote from al-Bājūrī, Tuhfat al-maʿāl, 118.

1315 Al-Nawawī, Sharh Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 2:12; Qāḍ al-Harawi, Mirqāt al-maṣfūth, 9:626. See also al-Qurtubī, al-Ṭāmimi’s al-aḥkām al-Qur‘ān, 17:92: “Allah Most High placed his eyes in his heart so that he saw his Lord, Most High, and Allah made that a (true) vision.”

1316 See above.

1317 On the popularity of this tradition see Geissinger, “Exegetical Traditions of 'Āʾisha,” 12.
The anthropomorphist implications of a physical vision does indeed seem to be what compelled the choice of a *nu'ya bi 'l-qalb* for some, particularly later traditionists. 'Alî al-Mutaqqî (d. 1567) said regarding the *hadîth al-shâhb* on the authority of Ibn 'Abbâs, "It is tolerable as a dream-vision," a sentiment expressed earlier by al-Dhahabî (d. 1374) who said of this report "The vision is a dream vision if it is sound." An equally strong motivation, however, was the desire to harmonize the conflicting positions of Ibn 'Abbâs and 'A'isha. The mutual exclusivity of the positions of two important Companions on such an important theological issue— the nature of the divine, in short— did violence to the Sunnî dogma of the collective probity of the Šâhâba. This dogma is the Sunnî answer to the Shi'i dogma of the collective apostasy of the Companions who failed to recognize `Alî b. Abî Ṭâlib's caliphate. Both dogmas are attempts by the respective communities to come to terms historiographically with the traumatizing intra-Šâhâba conflicts of the first thirty post-prophetic years of the *umma*, which revolved around the question of succession to Muḥammad. While the dogma of the collective probity of the Companions fails to identify the right and wrong parties at the battles of the Camel and at Šîblîn, it does affirm that all of the Companions are honest witnesses of the Prophet and reliable transmitters. Such a dogma makes it necessary, or so it would seem, to reconcile major opposing doctrinal positions among them. Ibn Ḥajar (d. 1448) therefore argued:

(The Prophet) did not see Him with his eyes. He saw Him with his heart. On this basis it is possible to reconcile between the affirmation of Ibn 'Abbâs and the denial of 'A'isha in that her denial is a denial of a physical vision (*nu'ya al-baṣar*) and the affirmation (of Ibn 'Abbâs) is an affirmation of a dream-vision (*nu'ya al-qalb*).  

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1318 *Kanz al-umma*l, 58 #1153.


1322 *Fath al-Bârî*, 8:608.
Such reconciling tendencies were not rare and it was often Ibn 'Abbās and 'Ā'isha who, after first being made the representatives of opposing traditions, then had their traditions reconciled.¹³²³

7.6. Concluding Remarks

The list of those on record explicitly affirming the Vision or transmitting aḥādīth al-ruʿya is a Who's Who among the (Proto-)Sunni's. Makhūl al-Shāmī (d. 730-35), Saʿīd b. al-Musayyib of Medina (d. 713), 'Āmir b. Sharāḥil al-Ṣaḥbī (d. 721-8) of Kūfa and al-Ḥasan of Baṣra (d. 728) were considered the four leading scholars of that time.¹³²⁴ At least three of these reported the Vision: Makhūl,¹³²⁵ al-Ṣaḥbī,¹³²⁶ and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.¹³²⁷ On this illustrious list is also: 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 713), Abū Saʿīd b. Saʿīd (d. 720),¹³²⁸ al-Zuhrī (d. 742), 'Abd al-Mālik b. 'Abbās al-Azīz b. Jurayj (d. 767),¹³²⁹ Ibn Iṣḥāq (d. 767), Maʿmar b. Rāshid (d. 770), al-ʿAwnāḥ (d. 773), Shuʿba b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 776),¹³³⁰ Hammād b. Salama (d. 784),¹³³¹ Sharīk b. 'Abbās al-Ṣaḥbī (d. 797),¹³³² Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (d. 813),¹³³³ 'Abbās b. Mubārik.¹³³⁴


¹³²⁵ Al-Baghwātī, Taṣfīr al-Baghwātī 4:69; Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim, Al-Sunna, 1: 326; al-Dāraquṭnī, Kitāb al-Ruʿya, 319 #233; 322 # 237.


¹³²⁷ See above.

¹³²⁸ He is the famous Egyptian muḥaddith who transmitted the hadīth al shābī of Umm al Ṭufayl. See above.


¹³³⁰ Ibn Khuzayma, Kitāb al-tawḥīd, 199.


¹³³³ 'Abd Allāh, Kitāb al-Sunna, 1:346, #748; Ibn Kuzayma, Kitāb al-tawḥīd, 200-202; al-Dāraquṭnī, Kitāb al-Ruʿya, 308.
Allâh b. Wahb (d. 813),\textsuperscript{1334} 'Abd al-Razzâq b. Ḥammâm (d. 826),\textsuperscript{1335} 'Affân b. Muslim (d. 835),\textsuperscript{1336} Nu'aym b. Ḥammâd (d. 843), 'Alî b. al-Madînî (d. 848),\textsuperscript{1337} Yahyâ b. Ma'in (d. 848),\textsuperscript{1338} Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855), Abû Zur'a al-Râzî (d. 878),\textsuperscript{1339} Muḥammad b. Yahyâ (d. 880),\textsuperscript{1340} Ibn Khuzayma (d. 924) and al-Ash'arî (d. 935), just to name a few. These are some of the biggest names of early Sunnism. This very partial list nevertheless clearly indicates that Muḥammad’s reported visual encounter with Allâh played an important role in the early articulation of Sunnism. It was, to use Andrae’s words, \textit{theologische Lehre}. It remained so in the 10\textsuperscript{th}-12\textsuperscript{th} centuries as Sunnism and Shi'aism became clearly defined and within the former traditionalist Sunnism was distinguished from Ash'arism (and other speculative theological schools, e.g. Mâturîdism). As George Makdisi has made the case, ‘orthodox’ Sunnism during this period was represented by the former (traditionalist Sunnism), not the latter (Ash'arism); and the traditionalist Sunnî 'aṣâda of this period included the affirmation of Muḥammad’s vision.

\textsuperscript{1334} He is the famous muhaddith who introduced traditions into Egypt. He transmitted the hadîth al shâbî of Umm al-Ṭufayl. See al-Suyûṭî, \textit{al-Letâ'îf}, 29.


\textsuperscript{1336} He was the colleague and teacher of Ibn Hanbal for ten years and was reportedly the first to be tried during the \textit{miḥna}. See al-Khaṭîb al-Baghdâdî, \textit{Ta‘rîkh Baghdadî} 12: 273. He transmitted hadîth al-shâbî. See above.

\textsuperscript{1337} Al-Lâlika’î, \textit{Sharh usâ’il} 2:510.


\textsuperscript{1339} The famous traditionalist of Rayy whom al-Dhahabî honored with the sobriquet ‘Hâfiz of the Age.’ See Lucas, \textit{Constructive Critics}, 78.

Chapter VIII:

Transcendent Anthropomorphism, Visio Dei and the Writing of
Islamic Theological History

“Belief that God possessed a visibly perceivable (though not earthly) body...is reflected in early
Islamic sources.” EQ s.v. Face of God.

8.1. The Problem of Anthropomorphism in Islamic Historiography

Elliot Wolfson has observed that “the problem of God’s visibility is invariably linked
to the question of God’s corporeality, which, in turn, is bound up with the matter of
human likeness to God...The problem surrounding the claim of visionary experience
invariably touches upon the larger philosophical-theological problem of God’s having a
visible form or body.” In Islam as well, the question of God’s visibility was raised in
the context of the larger question of anthropomorphism. James Pavlin has argued that the
“major theological controversies in Islam...revolve(d) around the nature of God and His
Attributes” and according to Richard C. Martin “The problems of
anthropomorphism and corporealism lay at the heart of the disputes about God in
Islamic theology.” The theological problem has always in some way been related to
the scriptural representations of God. As Duncan Black MacDonald observed: “The
(Qur’anic) descriptions are at first sight a strange combination of anthropomorphism and

1341 Through a Speculum, 20-1, 23.

1342 “Sunni Kalâm and theological controversies,” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (edd.), History

1343 EQ 1: 106 s.v. Anthropomorphism by Richard C. Martin

1344 Van Es, TG 4:374: „der Anthropomorphism in Islam durchwegs abgeleiteten Charakter trägt, insofern
er nicht einen genuinen Versuch darstellt, Gott mit menschlichen Kategorien zu erfassen, sondern immer
schon als theologisches Problem sich aus einem Text ergibt, entweder aus einem Hadiß oder aus der
koranischen Offenbarung selber.” But cf. ibid., 4:416.
metaphysics...With only a little ingenuity in one-sidedness an absolutely
anthropomorphic deity could be put together, or a practically pantheistic, or a coldly and
aloofly rationalistic (deity)."^{1345} The Sunna, as Daniel Gimaret noted, "ne se borne pas à
reprendre ceux, encore relativement vagues et abstraits, du Coran, elle les amplifie, les
précise, les concretise."^{1346} A qur'ānic hand becomes a palm with five fingers and
fingertips in the Sunna, etc.^{1347} How is this imagery to be understood? Literally?
Metaphorically? This question at times occupied center stage in the theological debate.
The real issue, of course, was the authority of scripture.^{1348} The Western reading of this
debate has been marred by the fact that most of the early Orientalists and later Islamicists
hailed from faith communities that had already struggled with the same questions and
decided, in the name of philosophic rationalism and ethical monotheism, that the
anthropomorphisms of their scriptures were simple metaphors. When these
presuppositions were brought to the study of Islam, Western scholars assumed that the
anthropomorphisms meant the same in the Muslim scriptures that they did in their
own.^{1349} They weren't disappointed either to find that medieval Muslim authors whose
works served as their sources shared some of their conclusions and thus confirmed some
of their presuppositions. Consequently, Western histories of Islamic theology, particularly
treating this very important debate, has been less than accurate and less than adequate.

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^{1346} Gimaret, Dieu à l'image, 14.
^{1347} For references and discussion see ibid. 189-227
^{1348} EQ 1: 106 s.v. Anthropomorphism by Richard C. Martin; van Ess, TG 4: 376ff.
^{1349} A good example being the discussion by J.M.S. Baljon, "Qur'anic Anthropomorphisms," Islamic Studies 27 (1988): 119-127. MacDonald said also regarding the qur'ānic anthropomorphism: "we are not to regard
(them) as due to an anthropomorphic theology but rather as the still plastic metaphor of a poet. To speak
technically, we have here only madhāj; tajallīm and taubah lay with the future exegetes (EI 1:302 s.v. Allāh)."
And more recently van Ess, "The Qur'ān is by intention strongly transcendental; it does not, however,
avoid anthropological language as a symbolic reference to God's actions and qualities...But all the passages
involved had a primarily metaphorical meaning (EI 10:342 s.v. Taubah wa-Tanzih)." See also Rcai Dogan,
"Metaphorical Expressions in the Prophet Muhammad's Hadith," in Metaphor, Canon, and Community: Jewish,
Christian, and Islamic Approaches (New York: P. Lang, 1999): 162-179; Baljon, "Qur'ānic
Anthropomorphisms"; Sweetman, Islam and Christian Theology, 1. 2:35.
Studies treating Islamic anthropomorphism are relatively few. Nor do Western scholars agree on the place of anthropomorphism in the history of Islamic thought. Helmut Ritter argued that a morpic diety was for Islamic orthodoxy “ein greuel.” According to Gardet, “The ‘orthodox’ schools…practiced tanzîh, i.e., they denied God any resemblance to anything; He is neither body nor substance (dhat, in the sense of bounded substance), nor accidents, nor is He localized, etc.” More recently, Binyamin Abrahamov, one of the few scholars today writing at any length on the subject, noted that “the anthropomorphists…were a minority among Muslim scholars.” W. Montgomery Watt too claimed that, “At an earlier period the main body of Muslims came to regard the Mushabbibiya (anthropomorphists)…as unorthodox.” But at an even earlier, I guess “pre-orthodox” stage, Watt suggests that “crude anthropomorphism” was a “widespread” trend. Such a suggestion was made already by Tritton.

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1351 Kitter, Das Meer Der Seele, 439 (=The Ocean of the Soul, 453, their translated as “abomination.”)

1352 EF 1:410f. s.v. Allâh by Gardet.


1354 EF 1:333 s.v. ‘Akîda by W.M. Watt.

1355 Watt, “Created in His Image,” 96ff.

1356 He notes: “From earliest Islam there had been a strong preference...to take these descriptions literally. It was said that God, when he grows angry, grows heavier and the throne groans under his weight like a camel saddle. Others explained that it was the throne that grew heavier, not God.” A.S. Tritton, Revelation And Reason In Islam, (London: George Allen & Anura Ltd., 1957), 21. See also idem, Muslim Theology, 48; “…these men (anthropomorphists) did not form a school, indeed many of them belonged to the Shi‘a; and it is a mistake to say...that they were a reaction against the Mu‘tazila. They are one of the facets of early Islam, one of the attempts to give a reasoned statement of the faith.”
Moore, and Wensinck. Goldziher attributed this "crude anthropomorphism" to the orthodox itself, while Martin suggests that "in the emerging orthodoxy of the late Umayyad period anthropomorphic conceptions of God must have been well established." Shibli Nu'mānī tried to rectify these seemingly contradictory observations by positing a quite detailed evolutionary development, worth quoting in full:

In the first stage (of the development of Islamic theology) God is held to be corporeal, seated on the Throne, possessing hands, feet and face. God set His hand on the shoulder of Muhammad and the Prophet felt that it was cold. In the second stage God is still held to be corporeal, having hands and face and legs, but all these are not like ours. In the third stage God is conceived to have neither body, hands nor face. Such words in the Qur'ān have not the real meaning at all but are metaphorical and allegorical. God is Hearer, Seer, and Knower but all these attributes are in addition to His quiddity (māhiyya). In the fourth stage God's attributes are neither identical with His essence nor alien to it (lā 'ays wa lā ghayr). In the fifth stage God's essence is absolutely simple. In it there is no sort of multiplicity whatever. His essence is Knowing, Seeing, Hearing, Powerful, etc. In the sixth and last stage God is conceived of as Absolute Existence, i.e., His existence is His very quiddity. This takes the form of the Oneness of Existence (Wahdat ul Wujūd), where we arrive at the point where philosophy and Sufism meet. It must not be supposed that these stages represent a chronological order in which the later superseded the earlier. Representatives of the different points of view were contemporaneous and still are.

With all of its complexity and detail, Josef van Ess, who has paid the most attention to the issue, finds such a schema too simplistic. He admits that, at an early stage

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1357 George Moore, History of Religion (New York: Charles Schribners & Sons, 1947), 419: "The common idea of God was crudely anthropomorphic. Taking the words of the Koran in their natural sense, men imagined God sitting upon a throne in heaven, a being with hands and feet, eyes and ears; a body, therefore, and some doctors of repute did not hesitate to say a body of flesh and blood."

1358 Wensinck, Muslim Creed, 106.: "In reality such 'extremes' as the Djabrites, Sifātists and anthropomorphists were not sects at all, but the remnants of early orthodoxy, who were branded as sects because the new orthodoxy took a different turn from theirs."

1359 Goldziher Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, 92: "Orthodoxy would not agree to any but a literal understanding of the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic expressions of the Qur'an and the traditional texts. God sees, hears, is moved to anger; He smiles, sits and stands; He even has hands, feet, ears. Such matters, to which there are frequent references in the Qur'an and other texts, must be understood according to the letter. The Hanbalite school in particular fought for this crude conception of God, which they consider sunna."

1360 EQ 1:5 s.v. Anthropomorphism by Richard C. Martin.


1362 Van Ess, "The Youthful God: Anthropomorphism in Early Islam," 2: "It would be too simple to pretend that Islam started with anthropomorphism and then gradually grew to adulthood and progressed to a more sublime concept of God: this would not do justice to the complexity of the development. Islam, in its
“(a)nthropomorphism was not a heresy… and it was not sectarian; it was part of Muslim ‘orthodoxy,’” but this ‘orthodox’ anthropomorphism will not survive the “onslaught of the Mu’tazilīs.” Even though the latter would end their career early and as heretics, their notion of tanzīh shaped Islamic theology till today, and so ultimately won, at least on that point. In the meantime, ‘orthodox Sunnism’ had to ‘readjust its fronts.’ According to van Ess, the latter too would adopt this God “der anders ist, nicht menschennählich.”

8.1.1. Classical Muslim Authors on Anthropomorphism

Western accounts of Islamic anthropomorphism are largely dependent on the classical Muslim doxographers, particularly Shahrastānī (1086-1153). In his Kitāb al-Milal wa ‘l-Nihal, Shahrastānī noted that the community’s division into a myriad of sects was based on four fundamental issues, the first of which was the question of the Attributes (Sifā) or the nature of God. According to Shahrastānī the Ṣalīf or ‘pious ancestors’ affirmed the Attributes and were thus called Ṣifāṭiyya. “All of them followed the literal meaning of the Qur’ān and sunna.” Later, Shahrastānī changed his position as to the manner in which the early Muslims understood the Attributes.

Some later thinkers went beyond what the early leaders had said, maintaining that the Attributes must be understood literally and explained just as they had been revealed.

first generations, expanded with unprecedented speed and thus inherited many different spiritual traditions. Anthropomorphism, then, only formed one alternative among others.”

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1363 Ibid., 5.
1364 EF 10:343 s.v. Tashbih wa-Tanzih by Josef van Ess.
1365 As van Ess observes regarding the Mu’tazila: “their theology in this respect shaped Islamic identity until today.” EF 10:343 s.v. Tashbih wa-Tanzih; idem, Flowering of Muslim Theology, 75. D.B. Macdonald (EF 1:306, s.v. Allāh) therefore did not fully grasp the situation on the ground when he wrote: “With only a little ingenuity in one-sidedness an absolutely anthropomorphic deity could be put together, or a practically pantheistic, or a coldly and aloofly rationalistic (deity). The only impossibility, as the Mu’tazilites found in the end, was a faîncant God, a stripped, abstract idea.”
1366 Van Ess, , TG 4:417.
1368 Ibid., 26.
without any attempt to interpret them or hesitation in accepting them literally. These fell into pure anthropomorphism, which was contrary to what the early leaders believed.\textsuperscript{1369}

We note that Shahrastānī previously affirmed in the Introduction that “the Orthodox were called \textit{S̲f̲atiya}...All of them followed the literal meaning of the Qur'ān and Sunna.” The \textit{S̲f̲atiya} are here divided into three groups, the Ash'arites, the Mushabbīha (Likeners or Anthropomorphist) and the Karrāmiyya.\textsuperscript{1370} The \textit{mushabbīha} or Anthropomorphists are not orthodox, but a “group of [excessive] Shī'ites (\textit{jawā'ī a min al-shī'a al-ghāliya})...and a group of (crass) Traditionalists (\textit{jawā'ī a min as̲h̲āb al-hadīth al-ḥashwīyya}).”

According to them God has a form and possesses limbs and parts which are either spiritual or physical. It is possible for him to move from place to place, to descend and ascend, to be stationary and to be firmly seated.\textsuperscript{1371}

Shahrastānī dismisses these anthropomorphisms as “lies” invented and added to the religion. Thus, Shahrastānī is equivocal. It is not clear from his account whether the \textit{Salaf} understood the \textit{S̲f̲at̲ al-Akhbār} (Qur'ān or hadīth reports on the Attributes) literally or otherwise. He says specifically though of Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, Dāwūd b. ʿAlī al Isfahānī, Muqatīl b. Sulaymān, and other “orthodox leaders” that they “took a safe path,” refusing to interpret the verses and denying God any resemblance to created beings.\textsuperscript{1372}

Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), in his \textit{Muqaddimah}\textsuperscript{1373} likewise attempted to account for the anthropomorphism of the early Muslims. Like Shahrastānī before him, Ibn Khaldun cleared the \textit{Salaf} of such heresies, attributing them instead to “a few innovators.”

The early Muslims gave preference to the evidence for God’s freedom (from human attributes), because it was simple and clear. They knew anthropomorphism is absurd... But there were a few innovators in their time who occupied themselves with the ambiguous verses and delved into anthropomorphism. One group operated with the plain meaning of the relevant verses. They assumed anthropomorphism for God’s essence, in that they believed that He has hands, feet, and a face. Thus they adopted a

\textsuperscript{1369} Ibid., 78.


\textsuperscript{1371} Shahrastani, 89.

\textsuperscript{1372} Ibid, 88.

\textsuperscript{1373} Translated by Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958) 3:46ff.
clear anthropomorphism and were in opposition to the verses stating that God is devoid (of human attributes)... The anthropomorphists then tried to escape from the anthropomorphic abomination by stating that (God has) "a body unlike (ordinary human) bodies...

Another group turned to anthropomorphism with regards to the attributes of God. They assumed direction, sitting, descending, voice, letter [sound], and similar things (for God). Their stated opinions imply anthropomorphism. Like the former group they took refuge in statements such as: "A voice unlike voice"; "a direction unlike directions"; "descending unlike descending." By that, they meant: "(not as those things are used) in connection with (human) bodies." 1374

Both Shahrastānī and Ibn Khaldūn describe these early "anthropomorphists" as "innovators", few in number, and outside the makeup of the main, orthodox body of Muslims. It is undoubtedly such accounts that lie behind Western characterizations of anthropomorphism as "a grave sin in dogma"1375 and the "anthropomorphists" as having early been confined to the margins of the faith. W.M. Watt therefore very minimally and superficially treats anthropomorphism in his The Formative Period of Islamic Thought. But this raises a methodological question: to what extent can such late accounts be relied upon to tell the story of theological development during the formative period? Both of our classical authors were Ashʿarīs whose aversion towards anthropomorphism is well known. We suggest that, while not totally uninformative, these classical accounts must be read in concert with earlier sources, even non-Ashʿarī sources. When this is done, a different picture of Islam’s early courtship with anthropomorphism emerges.

Aziz Al-Azmeh, in his "Orthodoxy and Hanbalite Fideism," noted that "Islam, still indeterminate in the first century, might under different conditions have developed into an anthropomorphism."1376 Our study of sources attesting to a tradition of theophany and Visio Dei in Islam suggests that Islam at one time did 'develop into an anthropomorphism.' When Ahmad b. Hanbal, whose dogmatic creed will become the Shībboleth of Sunni orthodoxy for centuries, mandated belief in the literal meaning of hadith al shābb — a dogmatic position that itself will characterize traditionalist Sunnism —

1374 Ibid., 46-47.
1375EI 4:685f s.v. Tashbih by R. Strothmann.
Islam, at least traditionalist Sunnī Islam, was “an anthropomorphism.” Al-Azmeh correctly observes:

When asked whether one may transmit a hadīth authenticated by no less than Qatāda after ‘Ikrima after Ibn ‘Abbās, which related of the Prophet his statement that he saw God in the shape of a young man, Ahmad b. Ḥanbal readily declared that one may, given the authority of the transmission. Can we agree with the Ḥanbalite position that such a statement has no anthropomorphic intension when it is not subjected to an allegorical interpretation...It is not reasonable to make a statement whose lexical sense is anthropomorphic, yet interdict both allegory and anthropomorphism...It comes (then) as no surprise to us that, given the interdiction of allegory and insistence on literalness, streetcorner religiosity purveyed an anthropomorphic Allah.\textsuperscript{1377}

We have shown that such views were not confined to the streetcorner; the learned theologian al-Qādi Abū Ya'la proves this point as does his support by the Caliph. Van Ess’s observation that “unrestricted anthropomorphism” did not survive the “onslaught of the Mu'tazilīs” is to be rejected also. As we demonstrated previously, the outcome of the Mu'tazili supported Mihnā was the concretizing and centering of anthropomorphism within the proto-Sunnī and Sunnī creed.\textsuperscript{1378} This orthodox Sunnī anthropomorphism will be sustained throughout the Formative Period, as evidenced by the various Ḥanbalī and non-Ḥanbali traditionalist Sunnī creeds that affirmed Muḥammad’s visual encounter with Allāh.

\textbf{8.2. Islamic Anthropomorphism?}

The inability on the part of scholars to properly assess the significance of anthropomorphism for the development of Islamic theology is partly the problem of semantics. What does a Western author mean when s/he uses the term “anthropomorphism” in an Islamic context? What did a particular classical Arabic author mean by his use of the term \textit{tashbīh}, most often translated as “anthropomorphism”? Both terms are equivocal and can be used in different, even contradictory contexts (at least the Arabic term). It is this author’s opinion that both terms have been used too imprecisely, and as such have had little value in descriptions of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{1377} Ibid., 264-265.
\item \textsuperscript{1378} Williams, “Aspects of the Creed,” 452-54.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
theological trends in early Islam. It is primarily this imprecise use of language that has precluded an accurate assessment of Islamic anthropomorphism, thus rendering insufficient current accounts of Islamic theological history.

‘Anthropomorphism,’ from the Greek ἀνθρώπος (“human being”) and μορφή (“form”), generally denotes ascription of human characteristics to a non-human divinity, but particularly and literally means ascribing a human form to God.1379 Greek philosophers such as Xenophanes (fifth cent. B.C.E.), when criticizing the much too human Homeric deities, initially used the term and its derivatives contemptuously.1380 This connotation of contempt remains effective even today. Implied in the term is a sense of “false” ascription of human characteristics or form to a “non-human,” indeed “non-material, spiritual” entity.1381 The problem with this term in this context is that it more often than not is made to bear the burden of signifying all ascriptions of human likeness to God. Thus, human emotions, thoughts, and actions, properly anthropopathism and anthropopoiesis, are subsumed under the designation anthropomorphism. The net effect of this subsumption is that discussion of the alleged “form” of God, the main point of the term ‘anthropomorphism,’ is often de-emphasized.1382 By reducing the discussion to anthropopoiesis and anthropopathisms, i.e. ascription of human “ways and feelings” to God, the whole discussion of anthropomorphism proper is derailed: certainly the scriptures could not have really meant to depict God “as a disarmingly familiar figure who acts in ways that often seem improbable for a divinity if not outrightly inappropriate.”1383 As James Barr observed, rationalistic thought takes offense to such descriptions of God as jealous, disgusted, regretful, etc., and in pointing out the metaphoric value of such statements, the real significance of the anthropomorphisms proper, which are now

1379 ER 1:316f s.v. Anthropomorphism by R.J.Z. Werblowsky.

1380 Ibid.

1381 Ibid. i: 317.


1383 Stern, “Imitatio Hominis,” 151.
“lumped in” with these anthropopathisms but whose context often requires a different hermeneutic, is obscured.  

This same obscuration is operative in Western treatment of the Arabic tashbīḥ - even more so. The verbal form sh-b-h means literally “to liken (s.o. or s.t. to s.o./t. else),” thus shibā “similar to,” shabā “likeness, resemblance,” and tashbīḥ “assimilation/making similar.” This term is not used in the Qur’ān except once, in reference to the death of Jesus (4:157). Now, Muslim theologians of all eras and persuasions were unanimous in regarding tashbīḥ, that is to say, “likening God to creation,” as condemnable. The problem is, in many cases tashbīḥ does not mean, and must not be translated as, “anthropomorphism”; some of Islam’s, we would say “crudest” anthropomorphists, have been as adamant against tashbīḥ as the anti-anthropomorphists “transcendentalists,” (munazzābihūn). In fact, taking the history of Islamic discourse on the issue into consideration, it is desirable that scholars discontinue the ready translation of tashbīḥ by anthropomorphism, as such a practice inhibits our understanding of the nuances involved in the discussion.

At the heart of this semantic issue is the nature and degree of the “likeness” posited or prohibited: absolute likeness vs. only relative likeness. Ibn Taymiyya argued that the term tashbīḥ can denote a proper degree of likeness between Creator and created (i.e. relative likeness), and it can also denote an improper degree of similarity (absolute likeness) whose disallowance is mandatory. This nuance is most clearly articulated by the Ḥanafī qāḍī Ibn Abī al ‘Izz (d. 1390) in his Sharḥ al-‘aqīda al-Ṭahāwīya. Ibn Abī al ‘Izz begins by noting that the term tashbīḥ had become with the people “rather vague (lajz mujmah).” He too suggests that there is an improper tashbīḥ prohibited by the Qur’ān wherein an identity is posited between Creator and created, and a proper or allowable tashbīḥ wherein only a general or limited correspondence is posited. Whoever


1385 See below.


1387 Ibn Abī al ‘Izz, Sharḥ, 1:57 (= Commentary, 23).
denies the latter is as guilty as he who affirms the former: "It is clear...that the Creator and the created are similar in some respects and differ in others (ittifāquhumā min wajhi wa ikhtilāfuhumā min wajhi). And whoever denies what is common between them is a negator and is surely mistaken. On the other hand, whoever makes them homogeneous (mutamāthilayn) is a mushabbih and is equally mistaken. And Allah knows best. That is because, even though they are called by the same name, they are not identical (mā ittafaqā fihī)." Ibn Abī al 'Izz demonstrates this correspondence by citing qur’ānic verses wherein man is called by the names of God (e.g. 30:19, ḥayy; 51:28, ‘ālim, etc.). He argues that these are not mere homonyms, such as mushtari (which means both buyer and the planet Jupiter), similar in name only; the attributes of God and man share a common element denoted by the term. They differ in that God’s are attributes of perfection (Ṣifat al-Kamāl), whereas man’s comprise imperfections.

It is necessary to explore this argument deeper because it is in this author’s opinion crucial to understanding the whole “anthropomorphism” debate. For, though the above arguments come from later scholars, the sources strongly suggest that the same logic was employed by the early traditionalist Sunnī scholars as well. As noted above, tashbīh is not used in the Qur’an in reference to God. Instead, the pivotal verse wherein God’s otherness is most forcefully and (it would seem) clearly articulated, sūrat al-Shūrā [42]:11 (Laysa kaminīshī shay), uses a different root m-th-l, “to be like, compare,” mithl “similar, image” tamthil “assimilation, likening.” This verse is said to reject “all anthropomorphism.” However, a review of the exegetical history of this verse reveals that in fact this verse was first employed by advocates of anthropomorphism.

1388 Ibn Abī al 'Izz, Sharh, 1:62 (=Commentary, 27).
1389 Ibn Abī al 'Izz, Sharh, 1:63 (=Commentary, 28).
1390 Ibn Abī al 'Izz, Sharh, 1:93f (=Commentary, 44ff). The definite article used with God’s attributes is probably germane here, e.g. Al ’Amin (God) vs. ‘amin (the Prophet).
1392 Van Ess, TG 4.378; Gilliot, “Mufattil,” 57. According to Ahmad b. Hanbal, in his Ar-Radd, 96, Jāhm b. Sa'fwan (d. 746) was the first to use this verse in an anti-anthropomorphist manner.
still in their service in Ibn al-Jawzī’s time. This seems quite amazing. What is it about Layṣa kāmilāhī shay’ that lent itself to the exegetical needs of reputed anthropomorphists?

The answer to this riddle lies in the grammar of the verse, which could be read in two ways. Syntactically, the ka could be read as a syndetic relative cause (ṣila) added for emphasis, in which case the reading would be something like, “There (really) is nothing like Him.” If the ka is taken as a non-expletive, however, it would then read, “There is nothing like (ka) His likeness (mithālīhī).” As Ibn al-Jawzī noted, “taken literally (zāhir) these words indicate that God has a mithāl, which is like nothing and like which there is nothing.” Ibn al-Jawzī cites this verse as one of the proof-texts of the so-called anthropomorphists. They obviously took the mithāl here anthropomorphically. But how so? The mithāl of Q 42:11 was probably understood in these circles as a reference to God’s form, sūra, which term is a synonym of mithāl. His mithāl, ‘likeness,’ Ibn al-ʿArabī claims, is Adam, the Perfect Man (al-Insān al-Kāmil). Adam was made “according to the sūra/mithāl (form/image) of God” according to a prophetic tradition and he appeared to Muḥammad in an aḥsan sūra according to other reports. God’s aḥsan sūra, most beautiful form was exegetically associated with Adam’s aḥsan taqwīm, “most beautiful stature” (95:4) and both with God’s sūra according to which Adam was made. Adam’s “most beautiful stature” and God’s “most beautiful form” are therefore identical, at least in those circles so inclined. These exegetes might even have solicited the aid of sūrat al-Nahl 60: killiḥi ʿl-mathal al-ʿalā. God’s “highest likeness (al-mathal al-ʿalā)” here could

[Notes and references]

1393 Kitāb Akhbār al-Sifāt, 29 (Arabic), 148 (English).
1394 Ibid.
1395 Lane, Arabic Lexicon, s.v. صورة.
1397 Muslim, Sahīh, al-jannat wa sīfāt nāʾimihā wa alḥiḥā, #6809; Ibn Hanbal, Munadī, 2:315; idem, Munadī, 13:504, # 8170.
1398 See above.
1399 Ibn Hanbal, Kitāb al-Sunna, 59 quoted above.
1400 For a discussion of this verse and its relation to 42:11 see Ibn Abī al ʿIzz, Sharh, 1:63 (=Commentary, 44)
conceivably be identified with His incomparable *mithl* of Q 42:11, and then with His anthropoid *sīna*.

Others have taken the *ka* as an expletive and read “There is nothing like Him.” Even so, the verse was not necessarily understood in such a way as to preclude an anthropomorist theology. Understanding this verse to prohibit only absolute likeness, but allow for relative likeness between Creator and creature, allowed one to both disavow *tamthīl*/*tashbih* and affirm an anthropoid form for God.\(^{1401}\) The Qur’ānic context in fact seems to indicate that a denial of anthropomorphism was not what the verse necessarily intended. “And the blind and the seeing are not alike (*mā yastawī* 35:19).” The verbal root used here, *s-w-y*, denotes “equality, sameness, to be equivalent.” The man who can see (presumably the truth of revelation) is contrasted with the man who cannot. It is certainly not to be inferred that one of the men is embodied while the other is not. The difference, that which constitutes their “unlikeness” or “otherness,” lies elsewhere. Likewise, 33:32 “O wives of the Prophet, you are not like (*ka* any other women.” Whether or not the difference lies in the other women’s lower order of merit, as Goldziher thought, it is clear that there is no polemic here against anthropomorphism.\(^{1402}\)

Harry Wolfson argued that the early, “pre-Mutazilite” Muslims applied the legal principle of analogy (*qiyas*) to this theological argument, allowing partial similarity between man and God while rejecting a complete or total identity.

The explanation that naturally suggested itself to them (the early Muslime) was that the likeness which is implied in the anthropomorphic verses in the Koran is not to be taken to mean a complete likeness in every respect but that the likeness which is explicitly prohibited in the Koran is to be taken to mean a complete likeness in every respect...in their attribution to God these terms are only in some respect like the same terms when attributed to men; in all other respects there is no likeness between them. It is noted, however, that they do not try to explain in what respect they are unlike (*sic*). They are quite satisfied with the simple assertion that the likeness implied is not a likeness in every respect.\(^{1403}\)

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\(^{1401}\) Van Ess, *TG* 4:378: „Sie alle zweifelten wohl nicht daran, daß sie den Koran auf ihrer Seite hatten. Das *lāstā* *ka-mišīhi šai* (Qurʾān 42:11), das man ihnen später immer wieder entgegenhielt, brauchte sie nicht zu schrecken; dieser Schranke war schon mit der Feststellung einer relativen Verschiedenheit Gott von seiner Schöpfung und den ‚Dingen‘ Genüge getan. “

\(^{1402}\) Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 93.

8.3. Transcendent Anthropomorphism

A denial of tamthil or tashbih (or siwan, ka, kef) is therefore not necessarily a denial of anthropomorphism, God in the form of a man. The same expression (‘there is none like him’) was used for anthropomorphic deities prior to the Qur’anic revelation. It was found already in ancient Egyptian temple inscriptions of the Ptolemaic period. In this context, it meant neither that nothing was similar to God in any way nor did it presuppose monotheism. It meant simply that there is no other god like that god. Likewise, Second Isaiah’s theologically important dictum, “To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with me” (40:18-20), is no rejection of anthropomorphism; rather it “is meant to show the inferiority of man-made idols,” and this in the specific sense of immovability and unshakeability. Indeed, the very same formulas used to describe Yahweh’s incomparability (“Who is like [mi k’]; “there is none like [en k’]”) is similarly used to describe the incomparability of men and Israel: “Who is like (mi k’) the wise man? (Eccles. 8:1)”; “There is none like him (Saul) among all the people (I Sam. 10:24).” For Israel the dictum of Second Isaiah was not a rejection of anthropomorphism but an affirmation of the paradox of transcendent anthropomorphism. As Robert Dentan in The Knowledge of God in Ancient Israel puts it:

The particular paradox of belief in an anthropomorphic deity who is nevertheless utterly different from man is related to other paradoxes, and especially to the familiar one which declares that God is both transcendent and immanent, a paradox of which Israel was fully aware. She knew...that God was both like man, and yet entirely different from him.

This paradox was recognized in Muslim circles as well. Regarding the Islamic dictum Van Ess observed, “The statement (Q 42:11) did not decide the question whether

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dissimilarity between God and man was absolute or relative...Why should not the intention of the Quranic verse not be satisfied when God is merely considered to be different, perhaps by his dimensions, or by the matter He is composed of, or by the consistency of the matter?" Van Ess is not being rhetorical here. Islam's most notorious anthropomorphists, Muqattāl b. Sulaymān (d. 767) and Dāwūd al Jawāribī, said of their flesh and blood deity, "Nothing is like Him nor is He like anything else." How is He different? "bi-qudra," ("in power") said Muqattāl. Or, as Abū Tammām's "Nābita" believed, hawa shay' la ka 'l-āshyā' min jihat al-qidam ("He is a being unlike beings in respect of sempiternity.") These early Muslim exegetes thus saw no problem harmonizing their anthropomorphism with the qur'anic affirmation that there is none like Him. They coined the early formula, jism la ka 'l-aqsam, "a body unlike bodies." Muqattāl b. Sulaymān said:

God is a body in the form of a man, with flesh, blood, hair and bones. He has limbs and members, including a hand, a foot, a head, and eyes, and He is solid. Nonetheless, He does not resemble anything else, nor does anything resemble Him.

Later Muslim theologians interpreted this verse in a similar fashion. Muḥammad b. Sa'dun, better known as Abū Amir al-Qurāhī (d. 1130), famous Andalusian theologian, said:

The heretics cite in evidence the Qur'ān verse 'Nothing is like Him,' but the meaning of this verse is only that nothing compared to God in His divinity. In form, however, God is like you and me.


1410 Al-Ash'arī, Maqālat al-Islāmiyyīn, ed. Helmut Ritter (İstanbul, 1929-33), 209.


1415 Cited by Goldziher, Introduction, 93.
Maimonides, in his *Moreh Nebukim* (w. ca. 1190), makes reference to “people,” presumably Muslims according to Harry A. Wolfson1416 who “came to believe that God has the form (ṣūrah) of man, that is to say, man’s figure and shape...maintaining that, if they did not conceive of God as a body possessed of a face and a hand similar to their own figure and shape, they would reduce Him to non-existence. However, He is, in their opinion, the greatest and most splendid (of bodies) and also His matter is not flesh and blood.”1417 We can in fact identify patricians of such a tradition. One hails from 10th century Khurasan, Ibn Khuzayma (d. 924), the most prominent Shafi’i in Nishapur at the time. In his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa-ithbāt ṣifāt al-Rabb* the “chief of the traditionalists (ra’s al-muḥaddithīn)” takes up the charge that the traditionalists were “likeners (mushabbihā)” because they affirmed the literal meaning of the Ṣifāt al-Akhbār. Discussing their affirmation that God truly has a face (wajh), against the “ignorant Jahmiyya” who claim that God’s face in the Qur’ān is really His essence (dhāt), Ibn Khuzayma writes:

His face is that which He described with splendor (jalāl) and venerability (ikrām) in His statement, “The face of your Lord remains, possessor of Splendor, Venerability.” (God) denied that it perishes (naṣīf ‘anhu al-halāk) when His creatures perish. Our Lord is exalted above anything from His essential attributes (min ṣifāt dhātīhu) perishing...God has affirmed for Himself a Splendid and Venerable face, which He declares is eternal and non-perishable. We and all scholars of our madhhab from the Hijaz, the Tihama, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt affirm for God (the) face, which He has affirmed for Himself. We profess it with our tongues and believe it in our hearts, without likening (ghayr an nashabbihā) His face to one from His creatures. May our Lord be exalted above our likening Him to His creatures...Listen now, O you who understand what we mentioned regarding the manner of speaking common among the Arabs (jins al-lughā al-sā‘ira bayn al-‘arab). Do you apply the name mushabbihā to the people of narrations and followers of the Sunna? We and all our scholars in all our lands say that the one we worship has a face...And we say that the face of our Lord (radiates) a brilliant, radiant light (al-nūr wa al-diyya‘ wa-bahā) which, if His veil is removed the glory of His face will scorch everything that sees it. His eyes are veiled from the people of this world who will never see Him during this life...The face of our Lord is eternal...

Now God has decreed for human faces destruction and denied them splendor and venerability. They are not attributed the light, brilliance or splendor (al-nūr wa al-diyya‘ wa-bahā) that He described His face with. Eyes in this world may catch human faces without the latter scorching so much as a single hair...Human faces are rooted in time (muhdatha) and created...Every human face perishes...Oh you possessors of reason (dhawā‘ al-hijm), could it ever really occur to any one with sense and who knows Arabic and knows what

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1416 *Philosophy of the Kalam*, 102-3.

Ibn Khuzayma here adamantly argues for God's possession of a true face, but one dangerously radiant and non-perishable, in contrast to man's perishable and dull face: transcendent anthropomorphism. He asks, in short, 'Can one who acknowledges these differences be charged with tashbīh?' Certainly not according to the language of the Arabs! We have again both the affirmation of anthropomorphism and this disavowal of tashbīh.

This tradition of disavowing tashbīh while concomitantly affirming for God an anthropoid form was not confined to the margins of Islam's theological thought. The evidence suggests that it was the common position among the traditionalists and (proto-) Sunnis. We cite for example the oft-quoted statement by the traditionalist Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (d. 843) from Marw: “Whoever makes tashbīh of God to His creation has committed kufr. And whoever denies what God has described Himself with has also committed kufr. Indeed, all that God has described Himself with, or what His messenger has described Him with, there is no tashbīh in it at all.”¹⁴¹⁹ Now according to al-Suyūṭī Nuʿaym was one of the eminent Imāms (al-aʿīma al-aʿlām) of his day and a martyr of the Mihna.¹⁴²⁰ He was known, and by some criticized, for his transmission of what is undoubtedly the most unabashedly anthropomorphist report of Umm al-Ṭufayl wherein God is said to have appeared to Muḥammad in the form of a young man with long hair, green garment and gold sandals.¹⁴²¹ Nuʿaym had a reputation of being a “fervent defender” of the “most vigorous form of Sunni doctrine.”¹⁴²² It is thus unlikely he applied the Muʿtazilī method of taʾwīl to it. In light of this, how does one understand his above declaration that “all that God has described Himself with, or what His messenger has described Him with, there is no tashbīh in it at all”? We could probably answer this question by examining a colleague of Nuʿaym, the “patron saint of the traditionalists” Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.

¹⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 10f, 22f.
¹⁴¹⁹ On Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād see above.
¹⁴²⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, Al-Luḍāʾi, 29.
¹⁴²¹ See above.
We have elsewhere demonstrated that Ibn Ḥanbal quite unequivocally was an anthropomorphist in the strict sense: he was adamant about God’s anthropoid form.\textsuperscript{1423} To deny it is \textit{kuf\textsuperscript{r}.}\textsuperscript{1424} The same description of God as a young man with curly hair Ibn Ḥanbal put in his creed: accepting these descriptions literally (\textit{ʻalā zāhirih\textsuperscript{k}}) is incumbent upon all Muslims.\textsuperscript{1425} Ibn Ḥanbal was, if you will, “a true blue” anthropomorphist. Yet, he disavowed \textit{tashbih} in no uncertain terms. When asked about the statements of the \textit{mushabbih\textsuperscript{i}a}, Ibn Ḥanbal is said to have replied: “He who says ‘sight like my sight, hand like my hand, foot like my foot, then he likens God to His creation, and this limits Him, and this is evil speech which I do not like.”\textsuperscript{1426} It is also reported that he was asked: “Our Lord is not similar to anything from His creation (and) one does not compare Him to anything from His creation?” to which he replied: “Yes, there is none like Him (\textit{Na‘m. Layya kamithlihi shay‘a}).”\textsuperscript{1427}

According to Ibn Ḥanbal Q.42:11 was from among the \textit{mutashabh\textsuperscript{h}at} or ambiguous verses thereby requiring explanation,\textsuperscript{1428} and a proper explanation did not preclude an anthropoid deity. It was, says Ibn Ḥanbal, Jahm b. Safwān (d. 746) who first used this verse in an anti-anthropomorphist manner.\textsuperscript{1429} But Creator and creature do differ. How so? In a telling remark, Ibn Ḥanbal accuses the radically anti-anthropomorphist Jahmiyya of \textit{tashbih} for likening God to man by denying that His speech was eternal.

You have, by this assertion, likened Allah to His creatures for, according to your belief, there was a time when He did not speak. So are the sons of men, who could not speak until He created speech for them. This is \textit{kuf\textsuperscript{r}} and \textit{tashbih} together. Far be it from Allah! We say the opposite: Allah was always the speaker when He wished. We do not maintain that He was without speech until He created it; nor do we say that He was without

\textsuperscript{1423} Williams, “Aspects of the Creed.”

\textsuperscript{1424} Ibn. Ḥanbal declared, “He who says that Allah created Adam according to the form of Adam (as opposed to God’s form), he is a Jahmi (disbeliever).” Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, \textit{Tabaqāt}, I:309.

\textsuperscript{1425} Ibn Hanbal, \textit{ʻAqīda III, apud} Ibn Abī Ya`lā, \textit{Tabaqāt}, I:246; idem, \textit{ʻAqīda V, apud} Ibn Abī Ya`lā, \textit{Tabaqāt}, I:312

\textsuperscript{1426} Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Dar’ al-ta‘an\textsuperscript{d} 1:256.}

\textsuperscript{1427} Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Dar’ al-ta‘an\textsuperscript{d} 1:256.}

\textsuperscript{1428} Ibn Hanbal, \textit{Al-Radd\textsuperscript{d} 20.}

\textsuperscript{1429} To support his doctrine of God as “an invisible spirit.” Ibn Hanbal, \textit{Al-Radd}, 20.
knowledge until He created it; nor do we say that He was without power, light or might until He created them for Himself.\footnote{Ibn Hanbal, \textit{Radd}, 36f.}

Contrary to God’s creatures, which had to wait for him to create their speech, God was never without this ability. While both God and man speak with a real voice,\footnote{‘Abd Allah b. Ahmad said: “I asked my father about a people who say: ‘When Allah spoke to Musa he didn’t speak with a voice.’ And my father said: ‘Rather, your Lord indeed spoke with a voice. Theses hadith we report them as they came.’ He says also: ‘My father said (from Ibn Mas‘ūd): ‘When Allah spoke a voice is heard like the dragging of iron chains on stones.’ My father said: “This the Jahmiyya deny.” ‘Abd Allah, \textit{Kitāb al-Sunna}, I:280 #533, #534.} God had his speech from eternity. Most significant is the accusation against the Jahmiyya of \textit{tashbīh}. The Mu‘tazilite Abū ʿI-Husain al-Khāiyāt, in his \textit{Kitāb al intiṣār}, even labeled Jahm b. Ṣafwān “the \textit{imām} of the mushabbīha.”\footnote{Le \textit{Livre du triomphe} (ed. H. S. Nyberg; Cairo 1925) 133.} His sin was apparently that he likened God’s knowledge of things to man’s by his claim that God knows things only after those things come into existence. There is no way one could translate \textit{tashbīh} here as “anthropomorphism.” As Gimaret points out, “that which characterizes the Gahmiyya is fundamentally...their anti-anthropomorphism.”\footnote{Gimaret, \textit{Dieu à l’image} 28. On the Jahmiyya see further Gilliot, “La Théologie Musulmane,” 137-138; Muhammad Tahir Mallick, “The Traditionists and the Jahmiyya,” \textit{Hamdard Islamicus} 3 (1980):31-45; Abdus Subhan, “Al-Jahm bin Saway and His Philosophy,” \textit{IC} 11 (1937): 221-227.} Jahm could not tolerate the embodied God of his traditionalist contemporaries.\footnote{Wilfred Madelung (“The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran” in his \textit{Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam} [London: Variorum Reprints, 1985], V:505f) noted that the Jahmiyya assertion of a created Qur’ān “constituted an attack on the anthropomorphic...God of traditionalist Sunnism” and “the insistence of the traditionalists that God truly speaks is part of their general defense of an anthropomorphic and personal concept of God.”} None would thus accuse him of \textit{anthropomorphism}; “assimilation,” maybe, “anthropomorphism (\textit{stricto sensu},”) impossible.

This highlights the point we have been making: the term \textit{tashbīh} is vague and nuanced enough as to preclude any ready translation as “anthropomorphism.” One could not only disavow \textit{tashbīh} while affirming an anthropoid form for God, as with Muqatil and Ibn Ḥanbal, but one could also disavow the latter and still be guilty of the former, as with Jahm.
In light of this, how are we to understand Strothmann’s claim that “Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal has become the great orthodox authority against tashbīh.”1435 Is Strothmann claiming Ibn Ḥanbal as an authority against (totally) assimilating God to man, which the Imām indeed seems to have been; or as an authority against anthropomorphism, believing God to have an anthropoid form, however unlike that of man’s? The latter claim, which seems to be Strothmann’s intent, is untenable in light of our review of the sources testifying to Ibn Ḥanbal’s creed. Strothmann was probably following the lead of Henri Laoust whose article on the Imām in *Encyclopedia of Islam* [First Edition] he cites. There, the danger of an uncritical rendering of *tashbīh* is clear. Laoust noted: “Ibn Ḥanbal...rejects the negative theology (a‘rāf) of the Dījāhmiyya and their allegorizing exegesis (a‘wil) of the Qur’ān and of tradition, and no less emphatically rejects the anthropomorphism (tashbīh) of the Mushabbiha, amongst whom he includes...the Dījāhmiyya as unconscious anthropomorphists.”1436 We should clearly see here the inappropriateness of conflating *tashbīh* and anthropomorphism. Ibn Ḥanbal affirmed the latter (i.e. anthropomorphism), but rejected the former (*tashbīh*); and he accused the Jahmiyya of the former (*tashbīh*), but not the latter (anthropomorphism).1437

It is because of this uncritical and inappropriate conflation of anthropomorphism and *tashbīh* that an accurate account of Islam’s theological struggle over the issue of God’s attributes has yet to be written. This is not to say that *tashbīh* never has the meaning of anthropomorphism in the sources. It certainly does. But this has to be determined by the context.1438 A more critical reading of Islam’s theological history would make plain the tenuousness of Watt’s claim that “At an earlier period the main body of Muslims came to

1435 *EI* I:686 s.v. Tashbīh by R. Strothmann.

1436 *EI* I:275 s.v. Ahmad B. Hanbal by Henri Laoust.


1438 For example, al-Baghdādī (*Uṣūl al-dīn*, 74, 1. 14-p. 75) clearly has anthropomorphism in mind when he criticizes the mushabbihūn: *(The mushabbihūn)* said: ‘We likened Him to man’s image because of His saying, may He be exalted: “surely We created man in the most beautiful creation (95:4)”’. They said: ‘The most beautiful creation is a creation in the image of God.’ Also they brought forth as proof the saying of the prophet, may god bless him and give him peace: ‘God created man in His (own) image.’ And they brought as a proof for His having organs His saying: ‘The face of your Lord does last (55:27)’ and ‘I created by my hands (38:75).’ And (it is said) in a tradition: ‘the Omnipotent put His foot in fire.’ And they related: ‘The believer’s heart is between two of God’s fingers.’
regard the Mushabbiha (anthropomorphists)...as unorthodox.”\textsuperscript{1439} Tashbîh unquestionably was regarded as ‘unorthodox’, but this by anthropomorphists as well as others. The evidence indicates that anthropomorphist theologies played a much more significant role in the development of the Islamic creed than Watt’s near exclusion of them from consideration in his \textit{The Formative Period of Islamic Thought} would suggest. An adequate history of Islamic theological development must take these theologies more seriously.

A most fitting way to conclude our discussion of anthropomorphism, \textit{visio Dei}, and traditionalist Sunnism is with a ḥadîth reported by al-Suyûtî in his \textit{al-La‘âli‘ al-maşnû‘a fi al-aḥādîth al-mawdu‘a}.\textsuperscript{1440} The ḥadîth is narrated by Abû Sa‘âdât, a student of the Ḥanbalî al-Tabarânî (d. 971). It is transmitted via ‘Abd Allâh b. Aḥmad from his father, Ibn Ḥanbal and is a Ḥadîth Qudsi traced back to the Prophet via ‘Ikrîma < Ibn ‘Abbâs. We are told that Allâh descends every Friday night to the lower world (dâr al-dünîyâ) with sixty thousand angels and sits on a throne of light. Before him is a blackboard made of rubies on which is written the names of those members of the Prophet’s community who “affirm the Vision (al-Ru‘ya), the Manner [of it; al-Kayfîya] and the [Divine] Form (al-Sûra).” Allâh is proud of these pious affirmers before the angels and says: “These are My servants who do not deny Me. They keep the Sunna of My prophet and don’t fear the critic’s censure (laṣwmat lâ‘îm) regarding Allâh. I affirm to you, O angels, by My might and glory I will admit them into Paradise with no reckoning (hasâb).” Here Allâh himself is made to say specifically that Sunnism is defined by the affirmation of his anthropomorphic theophany. There is no doubt that, at least for the Ḥanbalî’s transmitting this report, al-Ru‘ya here includes both the believers’ Beatific Vision in Paradise as well as Muḥammad’s \textit{visio Dei} in this world. Those who affirm anthropomorphic theophany despite the criticism of the (no doubt) mutakallîmûn are guaranteed unobstructed entry into Paradise. This report is clearly a later fabrication: traditionalist Sunnîs and their theological adversaries are already entangled in dispute. Nevertheless, it has value as a traditionalist self-definition of its own ‘aqîda. This ḥadîth

\textsuperscript{1439} \textit{EF} 1:333 s.v. ‘Akîda by W.M. Watt.

\textsuperscript{1440} 1:26-27.
succinctly makes the point we have argued in Chapter VII, but even more so: central to the traditionalist Sunni `aqīda is Allāh's anthropomorphic theophany.
Chapter IX:

Conclusion

We have argued in this dissertation that:

1.] Neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Qur’an unambiguously present the Divine as invisible and (therefore) non-theophanous. In the case of the HB, God is most certainly neither. The God of Israel appears to individuals and (occasionally) groups as a divine anthropos, either in glory (the kāhôd-theophany), incognito (the mal’āk-theophany), or veiled behind a dark cloud (the pillar of cloud-theophany). YHWH is unseen, not because he is invisible, but because it is dangerous for mortals in their impurity to look on him in his holiness, a holiness manifest morphically as a dangerously radiant divine body. Passages such as Exod. 33:18-23 and Deut. 4:12 are not affirmations of divine invisibility, but qualifications on divine visibility. Sinful man standing in the (visual) vicinity of God’s radiant holiness will be consumed and die. To protect Israel from this natural consequence of the theophanic encounter YHWH veils his luminosity in a dark cloud, out of which he speaks, or a mortal ‘appearing’ human form (mal’āk).

2.] The biblical prophetic call narrative is a subset of the theophany narrative, and as such involves an initial theophany. At least two prophetic-call types are clearly distinguished in the HB: one involving an encounter with God enthroned in his luminous glory (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1), often amidst his divine council (Isaiah 6 and 40); the other involving God incognito, unassuming and therefore unrecognized (Exodus 3; Judges 6), sometimes seeming like a mortal human himself (Judges 6). While it is not easy to form-critically place the calls of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1) and Samuel (1 Samuel 3), both involved a theophany.

3.] The qur’ānic/Islamic affirmation of prophetic/revelatory continuity with biblical tradition suggests, a priori, that Islam possesses a tradition of theophany and visio Dei not unlike that of the Bible’s. Though currently Islamic and (Western) Islamicist tradition
generally deny this, a closer look at the relevant Qur'ānic passages in the light of the biblical and ANE subtexts suggests that Allah in the Qur'ān, like Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, is visible and theophanous. Rather than affirming divine invisibility the Qur'ān, like the HB, qualifies divine visibility. Seeing God is fatal because his jālāl or luminous majesty is powerful enough to level mountains (Q.7:143). Moses and Israel, like the mountain, are presented as victims of the theophanic encounter (7:143; 2:55-56; 4:153). God thus does not speak to man except from behind a protective veil (42:50). While seeing the veiled God is possible, this mediated seeing (ru'ya) does not allow for īdrāk or the full perception/comprehension of God (6:103).

4.] Allah in the Qur'ān is theophanous. Both Moses and Muḥammad experienced theophanies (7:143; 53:1-18; 81:23). While Moses fell dumbstruck, a victim of the theophanic encounter, Muḥammad's "eyes swerved not, nor did they exceed the limit (53:17)." This seems to be the Qur'ānic basis of the later claim of Muḥammad's superiority over Abraham and Moses on account of his visual experience of God. Q 7:143 and 53:1-18 are therefore actual accounts of theophanies, however much the prophetic responses differed.

5.] Consistent with the biblical call-tradition the Qur'ānic allusions suggest that Muḥammad's call involved a throne-theophany, like the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, not an angelophany. The canonical traditional account of Muḥammad's call describing his inaugural encounter with the angel Jibril is clearly secondary, inspired in part by the increasing scandalization of the anthropomorphism implied in the idea of divine visibility.

6.] A defining aspect of the traditionalist Sunnī 'aqidah or creed for the first four centuries (9th-12th C.E.) was the affirmation of Muḥammad's visual encounter with God. According to the hadīth literature 19 + Companions of Muḥammad reported the latter's Vision. The only unambiguous denial is that attributed to 'Ā'ishah, wife of the Prophet. The force of this denial is somewhat lost, however, due to the fact that affirmations are also attributed to her. Traditionalist Sunnism for the most part marginalized 'Ā'ishah's vehement denial, privileging instead the affirmation of Ibn 'Abbās. Important pillars of (proto-)Sunnism, such as al-Ḥasan al- Baṣrī (d. 728), Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855), al-Ṭabarī (d. 935) and al-Qāḍī Abū Ya'la (d. 1066) affirmed the Vision; the latter three explicitly
afirming Muḥammad's vision of the youthful deity. Indeed, belief in this youthful, anthropomorphic epiphany characterized the traditionalist Sunnism of the Ḥanābila, the main representatives of Sunni orthodoxy from the ninth through the twelfth centuries. In effect, Islam, at least traditionalist Sunnism, was during this period “an anthropomorphism,” to use al-Azmeh’s terminology.

In 1967 historian of religion-turned-Islamicist Charles Adams lamented the fact that, on his reading, Islam is “extraordinarily, one may say perversely, impervious” to history-of-religions analysis.1441 According to Adams, “the mainstream of Islamic tradition,” by which he means traditionalist Sunnism, is povertous in mythological expression. While Şūfīsm and Shi‘ism enjoy a ‘richness of symbolic expression,’ the juridical-theology of Sunnism is “markedly rationalistic in self-expression and determinedly iconoclastic.”1442 This is certainly true of modern articulations of Islam, but our study has shown that the juridical-theology of classical traditionalist Sunnism was quite rich in mythological expression and this expression is consistent with the biblical and ANE mythic tradition. The discovery of this lost tradition of theophany and visio Dei in Islam and its rich mythological content evinces an Islam that is squarely within the tradition of ‘Oriental monotheism,’ that Semitic monotheism anchored in the ANE mythic tradition.1443 This study therefore offers more optimistic prospects for a history-of-religions analysis of Islam.


1442 Ibid., 182-183.

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