

REVELATION AND THE HUMAN PERSON, OR ON ACTIVITY AND PASSIVITY

“E very communication on the part of God bears the mark of ultimate incommunicability. In this sense, it is true that revelation fully discloses only the relation between God and the human person, even though the revelation of that relation must primarily concern the One who initiated it. Nothing can reveal God completely as He is in Himself,” wrote Louis Dupré. In his view, even in revelation God does not express Himself fully. An impenetrable darkness of divine mystery always remains¹. Mircea Eliade also reflected on this question. In considering archaic cultures, he observed that we often wonder how the Infinite can reveal itself in finite objects (a tree, a stone, or a spring)². Yet what should astonish us first of all is the very fact that the transcendent reveals itself at all. How does the Absolutely Other enter our finite world and allow itself, in some way, to be encountered? According to Max Scheler, if God is to be known by the human person at all, He must make Himself known³. This points to a certain kind of passivity in the religious attitude.

The religious person (especially one formed within a prophetic tradition) experiences being “addressed,” or even, as Paul Tillich puts it, being “grasped by the Unconditioned”⁴.

Perhaps the most moving formulation is Abraham Joshua Heschel’s account of God in search of man: “Faith is not the product of searching and testing, but a response to a challenge which no one can forever ignore. [...] Philosophy begins with man’s question; religion begins with God’s question and man’s answer”⁵. We are invoking here the words of a Jewish philosopher, and therefore of a thinker belonging to a tradition that understands the Absolute in personal terms. It seems, however, that an account of a similar experience can also be found in Plato. In the *Symposium* we read: “He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty [...]: beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things”⁶. We encounter a similar passivity in Plotinus: for the upward path to be accomplished at all, the soul must be moved by grace; an event of illumination by the One must occur⁷. In the *Hymn of the*

1 Louis Dupré, *Inny wymiar. Filozofia religii*, trans. Sabina Lewandowska (Kraków, 1991), p. 224.

2 Mircea Eliade, *Sacrum i profanum*, trans. Robert Reszke (Warszawa, 1999), pp. 7–9.

3 Max Scheler, *Problemy religii*, trans. Adam Węgrzecki (Kraków, 1995), pp. 207–329.

4 See Paul Tillich, *Pytanie o Nieuwarunkowane*, trans. Juliusz

Zychowicz (Kraków, 1994), p. 29.

5 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Człowiek nie jest sam. Filozofia religii*, trans. K. Wojtkowska-Lipska (Kraków, 2001), p. 69.

6 Plato, *Uczta*, 210e–211d, trans. Władysław Witwicki (Kęty, 2008), pp. 76–77. English wording adapted from Benjamin Jowett’s translation.

7 See Plotinus, *Enneady VI*, trans. Adam Krokiewicz (Warszawa, 2003).

Pearl, a text belonging to the Gnostic tradition, the messenger at one point falls into a stupor and is roused from sleep by a letter that “became speech”⁸. The letter not only awakens the envoy with its voice, but also turns into light and leads him back to the Father’s house. Jerzy Prokopiuk, in turn, describes the Gnostic process of knowing as follows: “Gnostic knowledge-experience is received by the human person in the form of revelation (spontaneously, when the initiative appears to come from the Deity or another spiritual being) – in which case it is apocalyptic knowledge (*apokalypsis* = revelation) – or in the form of illumination or initiation, when the human person appears to initiate the process of self-transformation, whether at the level of the self (‘higher self’) or by a decision of the *ego*. This process of self-transformation – through the ‘training’ of psychomoral exercises and meditation – Is intended to make the person a suitable ‘instrument of cognition’ and enable the reception of revelation”⁹.

On the other hand, these same thinkers emphasize that passivity by no means signifies idleness, and that one can (and indeed should) prepare properly for religious experience. Such preparation may take many forms: meditation, prayer, acts of worship, the performance of good deeds, and submission to rigorous discipline. Max Scheler is even convinced that proper preparation, including (and perhaps above all) in the moral sphere, makes knowledge of God possible and enlarges its scope. The disclosure

itself, however, is no longer dependent on the religious subject. In his lectures on Christian mysticism, Louis Dupré writes: “A revelatory religion invites the spiritual pilgrim to sacrifice his own perspective and to follow the Absolute in its self-revelation. In this second and more fundamental negation he first fully acknowledges his efforts, even his ascent toward the Absolute, as essentially inadequate. No spiritual effort will bring me to the goal unless I am brought there by grace”¹⁰.

Does this mean, however, that human activity in religious experience is exhausted at the stage of preparation, before the threshold of the experience itself is crossed? In attempting to answer this question, let us confine ourselves to the Jewish and Christian traditions, for which the word is the fundamental medium of revelation, and examine the relationship between the mystic and the religious authority preserved in sacred scripture as described by Gershom Scholem, the scholar of Jewish mysticism.

Scholem is convinced that, in encountering the sacred text of a tradition, the mystic subjects it to a thorough reinterpretation. This process not only uncovers entirely new dimensions that had previously gone unnoticed, but often also transforms the text’s original meaning: “the hard and, as it were, unambiguous word of revelation, which admits of no equivocation, is filled with *i n f i n i t e* meaning”¹¹. Such an approach undoubtedly expresses both the mystic’s creative disquiet and a dissatisfaction with

⁸ *Hymn o Perle*, trans. Czesław Miłosz (Kraków, 1983), p. 8.

⁹ Jerzy Prokopiuk, *Gnoza i gnostycyzm*, part 1, http://www.gnosis.art.pl/prokopiuk_gnoza_i_gnostycyzm01.htm (accessed 24 June 2026).

¹⁰ Louis Dupré, *Głębsze życie*, trans. Maria Tarnowska (Kraków, 1994), pp. 46–47.

¹¹ Gershom Scholem, *Autorytet religijny a mistyka, in Kabała i jej symbolika*, trans. Ryszard Wojnakowski (Kraków, 1996), p. 17.

the literal sense of the Holy Book. The *Zohar* teaches that “cursed is the spirit of the man who sees in the Torah only simple narratives and ordinary words”¹². The mystic therefore descends into the depths of Scripture in order to discover its true – that is, hidden – meaning.

Connected with this position is a narrative shaped by Lurianic Kabbalah, according to which every word of the Torah revealed to Moses at Sinai has six hundred thousand faces, corresponding to the number of Israelites who stood at the foot of the mountain¹³. Each face is turned toward only one of them and allows itself to be seen and deciphered by that person alone. This is a metaphorical statement of the fact that every person has an individual mode of access to revelation, while no one can exhaust the infinite meaning of the Torah independently, since only one of its aspects is revealed to each person. “Just as divine thought differs from human thought in its infinite depth, so no single interpretation of the Torah is capable of grasping its living fullness”¹⁴.

Scholem observes that this ambivalent attitude toward Scripture has its source in the mystic’s dual posture, at once conservative and revolutionary. On the one hand, the mystic feels compelled to accept the authority of Scripture in its historical form; on the other, dissatisfaction with its literal

meaning impels the mystic to seek deeper layers within it. This search frequently leads to the traditionally established meaning being disregarded in favor of the mystic’s own interpretation, or treated as historically conditioned. Its driving force is, of course, the desire to revitalize tradition by renewing a personal relationship with revelation. For this to be possible, one must recognize that “the wellspring of revelation never ceases to flow”¹⁵. Only then can the voice of revelation, which resounds without interruption, be heard anew by every person. Since each person hears the word of God addressed directly and individually to them, that word must be infinite—or, as Scholem writes, pregnant with infinite meaning.

Jewish mystics take this conviction even further than the medieval rabbis, the creators of the Talmud, who held that revelation contains commentary within itself as a sacred transmission of its meaning¹⁶. According to Scholem, the mystics draw the ultimate consequences from this Talmudic understanding of revelation and tradition as religious categories. They maintain that the absolute word of God, containing His very essence, must in itself still be devoid of meaning: “This word announces itself originally in its infinite fullness, but this announcement is incomprehensible! It is not a communication intended to convey meaning. Only when mediated does such an announcement – which in itself was merely an expression of essence – also become

¹² *Zohar* III, 149b, quoted in Guy Casaril, *Rabbi Siméon bar Yochai et la Cabbale* (Bourges, 1961), p. 8.

¹³ In another, earlier version, the number given is seventy. This is the traditional number of nations inhabiting the earth and at the same time symbolizes infinity. See Gershom Scholem, *Sens Tory w mistyce żydowskiej*, in *Kabala i jej symbolika*, cited above, p. 72.

¹⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Mistycyzm żydowski i jego główne kierunki*, trans. Ireneusz Kania (Warszawa, 1997), p. 39.

¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Objawienie i tradycja jako kategorie religijne w judaizmie*, in *Judaizm. Parę głównych pojęć*, trans. Juliusz Zychowicz (Kraków, 1991), p. 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

communication”¹⁷. Here we encounter the mystics’ distinctive understanding of revelation. Far more important to them than any “meaning” or “message” that might constitute the content of divine revelation is the very fact that God expresses Himself, even if this expression lies entirely beyond the sphere of human cognition. From this point of view, the Torah is an absolute that precedes every phase of human interpretation.

If revelation is indeed something absolute (something that bestows meaning while itself remaining without meaning) then only through its continuous relation to time, within tradition, is it interpreted and enabled to manifest its infinite sense, which cannot be enclosed within a single act of revelation. The passage quoted above also implies that the meaningful text of the Torah already constitutes a mediation of revelation through which the incomprehensible Absolute Word becomes manifest.

This conviction leads the Kabbalists to reinterpret the traditional doctrine of the two Torahs: the Oral Torah, consisting of commentary, and the Written Torah, the text preserved in the Pentateuch. The rabbis held that the entire content of the Oral Torah, developed by scholars of Scripture, had the same source as the Written Torah and therefore had, in a sense, always been known, since Moses received both at Sinai. The Oral Torah also constitutes an indispensable complement to and concretization of the Written Torah; the Law as a whole therefore comprises both layers. Understood in this way, commentary (or tradition)

becomes an element of revelation. “The contribution that every generation makes to tradition is projected back into the eternal present of the revelation at Sinai”¹⁸.

Thus the mystic, for whom “the literal sense of the Torah is darkness, while its mystical sense is the ‘zohar’ that shines forth from every line of Scripture”¹⁹, provided that Scripture is properly interpreted, remains in a state of potential tension with the authority preserved in the Book, for which the devaluation of its literal meaning may prove destructive.

Scholem believes that this attitude of the mystic toward Scripture is not peculiar to Kabbalah. He cites the example of Saint Paul, whom he regards as the most outstanding revolutionary Jewish mystic. According to Scholem, Paul’s experience, which could not be reconciled with the former meaning of Scripture, led him to an entirely new interpretation that ultimately shattered the framework of traditional authority. Moreover, this collision resulted not only in the destruction of the old authority but also in the establishment of a new one. “The new authority that arises, and for which even the apostolic letters serve as a text, is revolutionary in nature. It breaks with the authority created by Judaism because it has found a new source; nevertheless, it continues to preserve some of the imagery of the old authority, now transposed into a purely spiritual dimension”²⁰.

On the one hand, then, the mystic accepts the traditional text and, what is more,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Autorytet religijny a mistyka*, cited above, p. 20.

discovers his or her own experience within it. On the other hand, the mystic's creative approach to that text always entails the risk of an interpretation that no longer fits within the boundaries of tradition.

What Scholem writes about the mystic's relationship to the sacred text accords with the intuitions of Paul Ricoeur, who, in juxtaposing two types of revelation – manifestation and proclamation – states: "By the hermeneutics of religious discourse [...] I understand the continually renewed activity of interpretation by which a community or an individual appropriates the meaning of the discourses heard and the texts read that ground their collective and individual existence"²¹. Ricoeur contrasts the hermeneutics of proclamation, characteristic of religions rooted in the biblical tradition, with another type of revelation found primarily in archaic traditions: the phenomenology of the sacred²². Ultimately, however, he concludes his essay by stating that the types of revelation discussed there do not occur in a pure state: "There would be no hermeneutics if proclamation did not exist. But there would be no proclamation if the word itself were not a power, and thus did not possess the power to bring forth the new being that it announces"²³. This would mean that the prophetic traditions do not break as radically with cosmic symbolism as might appear.

Mircea Eliade, mentioned above, argued that in archaic religions almost any object

can become sacralized and can be understood as a hierophany – that is, a manifestation of that which is other²⁴. In Judaism, God reveals Himself primarily through the word of the Torah. In Christianity, by contrast, the hierophany takes place in the Revealer, the Word made flesh. Even though sacredness in Christianity extends to numerous facts and things, it is always referred to the person of Jesus Christ, the source of all sacredness.

Yet Jesus's experience does not take place in a vacuum. It is shaped by the Jewish tradition in which he grows up. It is through the Hebrew Bible that Jesus can recognize and name his experience, describing it in terms drawn from the tradition of Israel. Christ's revelation also relates to Scripture in such a way that it turns Scripture into a sign.

Jesus's disciples are able to follow the path he has traced by synthesizing the story of Jesus and the sacred texts. In the light of this synthesis, they are able to interpret their own experiences. In this way, tradition is not only read anew (with the person of Jesus becoming its key) but is also enriched by further testimonies: the testimony of Jesus himself and those of his disciples. At this level, too, faith appears to us as receptive and creative in equal measure: "it accepts, but in evaluating; it receives, but in giving structure; it listens, but in understanding," writes the French phenomenologist Henry Duméry in his study of Christian experience²⁵.

In this account, tradition plays the role of a distinctive background against which

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Objawianie a powiadamanie*, trans. Jakub Godzimirski, in *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka. Rozprawy o metodzie*, various translators (Warszawa, 1985), p. 357.

²² See Zbyszek Dymarski, *Gdzie jest sacrum?*, *Sensus Historiae*, no. 3 (2017), pp. 51–68.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *Objawianie a powiadamanie*, cited above, p. 37.

²⁴ See Mircea Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, trans. Jan Wierusz-Kowalski (Łódź, 1993).

²⁵ Henry Duméry, *Philosophie de la religion. Essais sur la signification du christianisme. II: Catégorie de foi* (Paris, 1957), p. 126.

the meanings of particular events are brought forth, together with the meaning of the Scripture that emerges from it. A sacred text can speak to its reader because the reader has already been prepared by tradition. Tradition is something we find already present, but it is not something dead. It is a living and continually growing reality that not only makes interpretation possible but is itself interpreted. It enters into a correlation with personal experiences: it "guides" and specifies them, enables their articulation in language, and can itself be enriched by them. In the light of tradition, we understand events that, in turn, deepen that tradition.

At the same time, tradition is not only the "author" of Scripture but also its interpreter. We can understand Scripture only insofar as we have already been formed by tradition, insofar as we live within its element and allow ourselves to be permeated by it. Tradition provides the key to interpreting Scripture, which does not exist in complete isolation and is not "self-sufficient." It is not enough simply to give someone the Gospel to read; it must be explained, adapted, and commented upon in order to be made living. The text does not operate automatically. It is through oral tradition that we can recognize our own experiences in the scriptural text. This function might be called a "mediating" one between religious consciousness and the text. It would consist not only in making accessible the revelation enclosed in the text and giving it concrete form, but also in filling it with the living experience of the community.

Scripture, in turn, enables tradition to embark upon entirely new paths without

fear of losing something essential. It guarantees tradition's durability and continuity and prevents meanings from becoming diffuse.

Nathan Söderblom referred to Judaism and Christianity as "religions of revelation." The aptness of this designation rests not only on the conviction that God has spoken to the human person. Equally important is the fact that the revealed word does not end its history when it is uttered or written down. Rather, it becomes the beginning of the history of its presence – a history of readings, commentaries, translations, disputes, works of art, and literature through which successive generations attempt to hear and understand the same revelation anew. It is precisely this history of the presence of the revealed word that the texts collected in the present volume seek to illuminate.

The volume opens with an article by Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spano, who invites readers of the Bible to view the biblical books as responses to the social, religious, and political disputes of the periods in which they arose. Wojciech Gajewski asks about the role of women in the earliest Christian communities, observing that only the later institutionalization of the Church led to restrictions on the functions they performed.

As has already been said, biblical interpretation never takes place in a vacuum. Kalina Wojciechowska shows how contemporary feminist and contextual hermeneutics read the biblical text from the perspective of experiences of exclusion, suffering, and marginalization. Figures such as Anna and Hagar become not merely protagonists of biblical narratives but also keys to new ways of understanding Scripture.

Edward Jakiel, Elżbieta Mikiciuk, and Jakub Antosz-Rekucki address the question of how the biblical word, when carried into literature, retains its capacity to interpret human experience and invest it with new depth. Edward Jakiel's analyses of quotations from the *Book of Job* in Stefan Żeromski's *The Story of a Sin* show that they do not serve a merely ornamental function but participate in creating the novel's meaning. For Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, the figure of Abraham provides an occasion to reflect on the human experience of faith and moral choice, as Elżbieta Mikiciuk demonstrates. Jakub Antosz-Rekucki, in turn, shows how Bob Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower* creatively engages the biblical motif of the watchman and the watchtower found in the

prophetic books and the Book of Revelation. The Nobel laureate's song thereby emerges not only as a literary dialogue with the Bible but also as a testimony to the continuing vitality of the prophetic imagination.

Revelation—in this case, biblical revelation—is not a completed reality or a relic of the past. Rather, it is an inspiration and a source of ever new readings, questions, and answers. The Bible therefore remains a book to which successive generations continually return—not only to understand the past more fully, but also to interpret anew their own experience and the world in which they live. Each such reading may be regarded as an attempt to respond to the word that never ceases to address the human person.

Abstract

Intended as an introduction to the theme of the present issue, this article examines the activity and passivity of the religious person in relation to the phenomenon of revelation. Since the Bible is the issue's central focus, the Jewish and Christian traditions provide the principal frame of reference. Within these traditions, revelation is understood as a process unfolding through the dynamic interaction of personal experience, the transmission preserved in Scripture, and living tradition.

Here we encounter a fundamental paradox of religious life, brought into sharpest focus in the prophetic traditions: how can God's all-encompassing, infinite Word be contained in finite human words? Jewish mystics answer this question radically, maintaining that although the Word itself is devoid of determinate meaning, it contains infinite possibilities of interpretation.

Keywords: revelation, tradition, religious experience, Bible, sacred scriptures