

# Revelation – How God Has Made Himself Known

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## 1. Introduction: A subjective experience

Our post-modern times seem to be very religious. People haven't been satisfied by sheer materialism and economism. They are looking for religious experiences. They want to feel the power of something which they consider to be superior to them, be it the power of a god or the unity with a higher being. Modern theology tells us that this may happen to you at any time. If you feel close to God, if you see that you are utterly dependant upon him, you may have experienced some kind of revelation. But you can also have it in a more philosophic way: If you see, that there is a dimension in your life which makes you recognize that you are not existing for yourself, but that you are open – open towards your neighbour and finally open towards something which is superior to everything, and if you consider that this something which is superior to everything may be God, you have had a revelation. Revelation in modern theology means: You become conscious that you are within a relationship towards somebody superior to you. You may call this somebody superior to you "God", although you cannot know anything about him, as our post-modern fellow citizen will tell us. You may feel that this somebody loves you, that he is sustaining your existence because he is superior to everything. You may feel accepted by him – just as you are.

All these insights may be called "revelation" according to modern thought. That kind of revelation is nothing else but human thought. It takes place within your mind. It's your subjective impression. All this sounds rather abstract or existentialist.

You may also put it that way: When I was sitting in church last Sunday, the preacher spoke about God and his son Jesus Christ. He explained that Jesus has come to earth to give us life in abundance. God loves man, and for that reason he wants to make man feeling happy, peaceful and without psychic problems. He has sent his Spirit to heal us from our inner wounds. – While hearing that sermon, my soul was deeply touched by the Holy Spirit and I got the impression that God in his grace was looking directly upon me. My soul was really lifted up by that sermon. It fitted exactly to my situation. It showed me that there is a loving God in heaven who meets the needs of my heart. It was a revelation to me.

That sounds more evangelical or charismatic or pietistic, but in both cases revelation is a subjective experience. Although you cannot produce that experience, although you cannot dominate it, it is nevertheless a process of getting new insights, yes, a new configuration of your Bewusstsein, your consciousness. That is, in short, revelation to modern man and to many modern Christians. By their subjective experience, they want to make sure that they are Christians, that God is alive and that he is present in their lives.

In our post-modern societies, Christian faith is considered to be one kind of religious experience among many others. Other religious communities would claim to have their own religious experiences. The Muslim would say: By observing our religious rites, we

feel to be closer to God, to please God. The Buddhist would say: By following our doctrine, we are discovering true life, we are getting inner peace, and perhaps they would add: We become more peaceful and better citizens, in order to justify their public influence.

Christians are confronted with a multitude of religious convictions. People with different non-Christian religions are living in our neighbourhood, so at least in the western world. Who has got the right religion? The Christian, the Muslim, the Buddhist or the Shamanist? Or should we prefer the old Greek Gods from the Olymp mountain? We are challenged to justify ourselves for our faith in Christ. Christians in Muslim and communist countries are persecuted and perhaps sent in jail or killed for their faith in Christ. What reason do they have to remain faithful to their God? The basic answer is: God has revealed himself, so that we can know him with certainty.

## **2. God's revelation in history**

The Bible is speaking about revelation in terms totally different to the above mentioned notions. It shows forth that revelation is something objective, something which has happened, which has a place in history, something which could be seen and heard.

In Hebrews 1:1-2 we read: *God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.* I would like to comment on that in the following. These two short verses tell us that in Old Testament times, God has spoken in different ways, but in the New Testament, he has spoken through his Son Jesus Christ. Let me show you the details. What are the divers manners or different ways by which God has spoken in the Old Testament?

### ***2.1. "Sundry times and divers manners" in the Old Testament***

I would like to show you six categories which can be discovered in the Bible as means of revelation:

#### *(1) Historical events*

If we look into the Scriptures, we will easily discover that it reports history and that it claims to report historical events. Cain's murder, the great flood, Noah's ark, God's covenant with Noah, Abraham's exodus from Chaldea, the birth of Isaac, the siblings Jacob and Esau, Moses and the exodus, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire during Israel's journey in the desert, the Mannah, the food from heaven, the conquest of Canaan, later on the wars of David, the draught in the time of Ahab and Elijah, the Babylonian exile and the return from it.

All the events reported in the Bible are means of revelation. They are God's work in history, and God's influence upon people or things are the mode of the revelation. God is exercising his influence either directly or indirectly upon people. He may reveal himself directly by working a miracle, for example that he restored the ability to conceive a baby in Sara, although she had been barren during her life and grown old, so that biologically, it was impossible to bear a child at her age. It may also be, that God calls a wind to separate the waters of the Red Sea, as we read in Ex. 14, 21 *And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.*

His influence upon the waters was indirect, by the means of the wind. But it may also be that God uses common patterns of human behaviour or the average course of history without anything extraordinary or anything miraculous. The discordance between Jacob and Esau seems to be something very common among brothers. It's the same with the wars between Israel and its neighbours. But nevertheless, God reveals himself by that very common history.

We must consider the whole of biblical history to be revelation history. Although many things are reported in the Bible, which happened outside the people of God or perhaps in relation to the people of God, they are nevertheless part of God's revelation because they are reported in the Holy Scriptures.

However, if we look at historical events, we discover that they aren't yet verbal speech. Historical events can be very ambiguous, yes, very dumb. More information is necessary.

## *(2) Institutional prophecy*

The Old Testament shows that in Israel throughout its Old Testament history there was something like an official and divinely ordained prophetic ministry. The Prophets were considered to be the servants of God. They were the recipients and transmitters of God's verbal revelation. At first, Moses was the prophet through whom God had spoken. We are told in Ex 33: 11 *And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.* Moses had a very intimate relationship to God. Through him, God laid the foundation of his saving work by giving him the Law, the basic document of the covenant between God and his people. What God had spoken through him became substantial and normative for every prophecy following. It is also the pattern of God's righteousness which had to be established in Christ many centuries later. It became the framework, in particular the legal framework, within which the prophets after Moses had to be evaluated and judged. That's why we have the five books of Moses as the first and main part of the Scriptures.

Later on, prophets had dreams, visions and auditions, by which the word of God was communicated, by which it came from the invisible world into our world. Let me give you the example of little Samuel. He was a young boy serving the old priest Eli in the tabernacle, when God called him in the night by his name. He was hearing the voice of God by his physical ears; so we must identify that way of revelation as an audition. I suppose that this was the way by which God spoke to the prophets, whenever we read that the word of God came to them. At other instances, we are told that the prophets saw the word of God through a vision, as in Isaiah 1:1 or Amos 1:1 and elsewhere. Ezekiel (as well as John in the Apocalypse) had many visions. They are reporting what they saw with their physical eyes.

In close connexion with institutional prophecy, we must also see the ecstatic elements reported by the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit coming upon people so that they began to prophesy, as it happened to Saul, when had been anointed to become king of Israel. He got in company with a group of prophets and began to prophesy as it is reported in 1Sam 10:10-12. Finally, because Balaam was a "prophet", I must also mention his ass speaking to him as an example of an undoubtedly special shape of the voice of God in space and time within the framework of institutional prophecy.

### *(3) Institutions ordained by God*

An institution is a religious, legal or social subject, established for longer times. Let me mention here the priesthood and the temple together with the cult, the office of the judges as well as the kingship, particularly Davidic kingship. In connection with this, we may also mention the people of Israel as *people*, with the Law of Moses as its constitution. We can find similar institutions also outside the realm of revelation in the people of Israel, in non-Jewish peoples. But in the context of his revelation, God unites himself with these institutions so that they become instruments of his revelation and clarify aspects of his saving work. Also the lot (Urim and Thummim, Ex 28:30) was an institution by which God made known his will towards the individual believer.

### *(4) Immediate vocal speech*

Here again I am speaking about auditions. God was speaking and man was hearing with his physical ears. Auditions frequently happened in the context of the institutional prophecy, as we have seen. But we must acknowledge that God by this means also revealed himself to many other people, for example to Noah to build the ark, to Abraham commanding him to leave his relatives and to give him great promises and so on. There are numerous instances reported in the Scriptures which show that God spoke to men by the means of auditions. We can easily find it in the New Testament, too.

### *(5) Visible appearances of God or the Angel of God or angels*

The Bible reports that the Angel of the Lord appeared to Abraham, Hagar, Moses, Balaam and at other instances.<sup>1</sup> There is some evidence that the Angel of the Lord can be identified with Christ pre-existent. But not always. In Mt 1,20, it is reported that he appeared to Joseph in a dream; at least here he must be distinguished from Christ.

Angels who have been created by God, time and again have been a means of revelation. We can see that angels appeared to Lot, Jacob, Elija and Daniel. In the book of Zechariah, the angel who talked with Zechariah is frequently mentioned. Similarly, the New Testament reports that angels appeared to Zacharias and the virgin Mary, at the birth of Jesus, to Jesus in Gethsemane, at the tomb at the resurrection of Jesus, to the apostles at the ascension, to Peter in prison and to Cornelius and to Paul (Acts 27:23-24). Angels frequently appear in the visions of John in the book of revelation. The biblical reports show that these angels appeared somehow physically and that they talked to other people in a way very similar to normal human conversation.

### *(6) The Law of Moses*

The Mosaic Law is the top of Old Testament revelation. It must be seen in close connection with the office of prophecy of Moses, but it is nevertheless a very special way of revelation. God had made the two tables of the Law and angels passed them on to Moses. The fact that God himself had written upon the tables shows the importance of the Law as the very word of God. This is a very special way of revelation. It's unique in the whole Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 18,1ff.; 16,7-11; Ex 3,2; Num 22,23-35; Ri 2,1-4; 6,11-22; 13,3-22; 1Chron 21,12-27

I hope that you have learned that God in different times and in divers manners has revealed himself in the Old Testament. Many details can still be mentioned, but I am confident that you have seen the manifold ways of the Lord to reveal himself. Let me add that we can find many of these ways of revelation in the New Testament, too. But there is still another and much more excellent way of revelation:

## ***2.2. The incarnation of Christ in the New Testament***

According to the New Testament God has revealed himself by the incarnate Son, who accepted a human nature and was conceived and born by the virgin Mary. In him, God has become flesh. Christ knows God, the father, from his pre-existence. He is God's image and the reflection of his splendour. This mode is unique. It has no parallel, neither in the Old Testament nor in the world of religions. These facts have to be appreciated elsewhere in detail. Here I would like to point out the special mode of revelation. By this mode the immediate and personal presence of God in the world is secured. Obviously this form of the presence is different from that one in the context of the omnipresence God. By entering into the world visibly, God opens up a completely new dimension to perceive him. God discloses himself to the utmost. Of course, not only incarnation itself is important, but also his suffering, his death and his resurrection are the culmination point of God's revelation. There is no greater revelation, no more immediate self disclosure. The following verses are showing the uniqueness of Christ:

*John 1, 18 No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.*

*John 3, 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

*John 10, 30 I and my Father are one.*

*John 14, 9 he that hath seen me hath seen the Father;*

*Col 1, 15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. ... 19 For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; 20 and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.*

*Col 2, 9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

*Hebr 1, 3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high: 4 Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.*

These statements are exclusively valid of Jesus. There is no other person of whom similar things could be said. Furthermore, the Bible can substantiate its claims concerning Jesus. It shows forth the detailed preparations made in Old Testament times for the coming of Jesus. The circumstances of his coming, the virgin birth, the appearances of angels and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy show that he is the one in whom God manifests himself.

The revelation in Christ has a formal and a material aspect. The latter one means that, according to the biblical statements above, Jesus as a person is son of God and God's image. God makes himself recognizable directly in the person of Christ. The God of eternity appears in the flesh. This is an absolute novelty in revelation history. Furthermore, Christ doesn't only talk about the righteousness of God, but he himself, being crucified, is the righteousness of God, the only one who fulfilled the law of God. In his death, he is at the same time priest and victim. Christ represents his people on earth. He is the new man, the new creature, the beginning of the eschatological world. In him, salvation is real.

So, we can see that the revelation of God formally reaches its culminating point in Christ; he is the climax of revelation history. In Christ, things come to pass which are unrepeatable, particularly the crucifixion and resurrection.

### ***2.3. Progressive revelation and material continuity***

I have stressed the fact that God has revealed himself in history. We may calculate that between Abraham and Jesus, more than 2000 years had to pass. The covenant from Mount Sinai lasted for more than 1400 years. So there is a considerable amount of time. During this time, the time of revelation, God has disclosed himself progressively. Abraham for example didn't yet know the Law. It was added about 700 years later. The promises of the messianic king given to David and his dynasty were added at about 1000 b.C. The prophecy of the Servant of the Lord suffering and dying for his people was given to Isaiah at about 700 b.C. I can only mention some outstanding instances. We can easily see that God didn't disclose himself once for all, but in "sundry times and divers manners". We can now grasp the biblical concept of revelation as history of revelation. During this history, information was added to what was already known. Former information was not replaced by new information, but new information gave more and deeper insight into the purpose of God. So the coming of Christ was prepared. Details were foretold so that he could be identified to be the promised Messiah.

Within that framework, we discover something still more striking: We can easily see that beforehand promises are given, which are fulfilled later, perhaps centuries later. God knows everything and he is the almighty one. He is able to announce what he is going to do, so that real prophecy is possible. He also is able to put in practice what is his will.

Let me simply mention that the New Testament time and again refers to Old Testament prophecy. It identifies particular instances in the life of Christ to be the fulfilment of particular promises. Obviously the announcement of the birth of Christ takes up the prophecy of Isaiah 7. It becomes clear that the son of the Virgin Mary is the Son of God and that God would give him the throne of his father David.

The Judaen king could be described as a son of God in the Old Testament, but he could claim to be the Son of God only by title. In reality, it remained unsolved, in which sense the son of David was the son of God. In the New Testament, it becomes clear that Jesus because of his generation by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary really is the son of God. At the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem, the New Testament order of salvation was particularly considered to be the fulfilment of the prophecy of Amos, that God rebuilds the tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16). It became obvious that the promises with respect to the Davidic kingship in the Old Testament are Messianic promises which were or are fulfilled in Christ.

Many other promises could be mentioned. But we can learn that by that scheme of promise and fulfilment, God shows forth that he himself is at work in doing what he has promised centuries before. He also shows forth his faithfulness and thus gives us reason enough to trust in him and to expect him to fulfil the promises given to us, to his church: the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

### **3. The inspiration of the Scriptures**

To complete the picture, let me say that the Holy Scriptures are nonetheless part of God's revelation. The facts God has established by his revelation in history must be communicated. If God has saved us through Christ, then salvation in him must be communicated. History includes that it can be reported. It belongs to our world, the world we are familiar with. It can be spoken about, it can be passed on to others. Revelation in history must be communicated, because people are living at a temporal and spatial distance to Christ and to the events of revelation. This is the task of the Bible, or, let me put it more precisely, the task of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, who were appointed by God to write down the canonical Scriptures. But – we may ask – doesn't that imply that the normative revelation of God is dependent upon fallible human beings? Aren't the authors of the Bible sinners and thus fallible?

With respect to the Bible, we still have another way of revelation. The Bible introduces itself as having been inspired by the Holy Spirit. We must recognize that inspiration is another important aspect of revelation. God is active again in giving the Scriptures. But what does that mean? Peter wants us to know in 2Peter 1: 16 *For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.* Here, he reminds his readers of the facts of revelation. But then he says 2Peter 1: 19 *We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: 20 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. 21 For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*

By these words Peter says that the interpretation of the facts of revelation is not a matter of normal human insight. Neither is the author of the Bible able to understand the facts of revelation correctly, unless the Holy Spirit enables him to do so. Now, God's Spirit has sustained and led the authors of the Bible so that they were able to understand and to communicate the facts of revelation correctly and according to the will of God. The result is that the Word of God, the prophetic view of the facts of revelation, is a *more sure word*. We can rely upon it, because it is God's word, *which doesn't fall away, but endureth forever*, as he has said in 1Peter 1: 24-25. The process to bring forth such a word again is an act of revelation. The Holy Spirit had to teach the authors of the Bible how to understand, to report and to interpret the facts of revelation, the work of Christ, and, for example, how to manage the problems in the early churches, how to think about the falsifications of the Gospel and how to deal with difficult Christians.

### **4. Conclusion**

Now we can see that the revelation of God rests upon two columns: on the one hand, we have the column of revelation in history, the column of God's deeds. On the other hand we have the column of the inspired Bible. This is still the case in view of the fact that

we have access to the first column only by way of the second, i.e. through the Scriptures. We can know and understand the revelation in the history only by the Holy Bible. The Bible points to the facts of revelation.

It is just that complexity of both which is characteristic of the Christian concept of revelation. Without history, without the facts wrought by God, the Bible would be a religious book, a mere testimony of faith, as it is frequently seen in modern theology. But the Bible reports history. But, seen from the other side, history would remain ambiguous or entirely dumb, if we didn't have the word of the eyewitnesses, the word of the inspired prophets and apostles who also show forth the significance of the facts.

Christianity thus presents itself to be a religion deeply rooted in history. It depends upon historical facts: the great deeds of God by which he has revealed himself. It culminates in the incarnation of the Son of God, who became a historical person, who lived on the same earth upon which we are living, who ate and drank with his fellow people, who died physically on the cross, who rose from the dead bodily.

So Christian faith is more than a teaching like Buddhism. Buddhism claims that it has been revealed to Gautama Buddha sitting under a Bodhi tree which cannot be localized any longer. It is supposed that this so called revelation showed him how man can overcome suffering. That's all. Christian faith is not like the muslim religion. Muslims believe that Mohammed was the inspired prophet of Allah and that the Koran has been dictated to him. But who is Mohammed? Although he claims to be the counsellor promised by Jesus, he cannot legitimate himself to be a prophet in a line with the Scriptures and he cannot authenticate himself by signs and wonders. Much more, he is teaching things which are against the Scriptures. To him, Christ is neither the Son of God nor the vicarious sacrifice for man's sins.

Christian faith doesn't derive itself from unhistorical notions of mythological gods and goddesses, which are supposed to exist upon the Olymp mountain, like Zeus, Apollon, Artemis, Athena and others. Christian faith neither is like a shamane religion, by which divine powers are banned for man's sake to become healthy and wealthy. Christian faith neither is a speculative philosophy developed by an ancient academy, which is to be discussed by modern theological or philosophical faculties. Christian faith according to the Holy Scriptures is rooted in historical facts. This may be exemplified and summarized by Pauls words in 1Cor 15, 3 *For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: 5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: 6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. 7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. 8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.*

So, look around into the world of religions: You will not find any other religion or world view which can legitimate itself as the revelation of our God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I would like to invite you to recognize God by his deeds in history, reported by the Scriptures. By his deeds, he shows forth that he is really there, that he is trustworthy, that he is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy*. By giving his beloved Son, he shows forth his love towards us. There is broad evidence that he has made himself known, so that we are not bound to follow our own imaginations and that we may have certain knowledge of him. Praise God for his revelation!