

Prophethood and Revelation

In Chapter I, we spoke in general terms of the necessity of prophethood and Revelation, for which the basis is the mercifulness of God and the immaturity of man in ethical perception and motivation. The prophets were extraordinary men who, through their sensitive and impregnable personalities and their reception and steadfast and fearless preaching of the Divine Messages, shook men's consciences from a state of traditional placidity and hypomoral tension into one of alertness where they could clearly see God as God and Satan as Satan. As we have repeatedly said in several preceding chapters, the Qur'ān recognizes this as a universal phenomenon: all over the world, there have been God's Messengers whether or not named in the Qur'ān (40:78; 4:164). These Messengers or prophets are "sent to their peoples" at first but the message they deliver is not just local; it has a universal import and must be believed in and followed by all humanity—this is what the indivisibility of prophethood means.

It is imperative that the prophet succeed in getting the support of his people, for otherwise his message has little chance of getting through to others and even when it does, it may be gravely distorted. The prophets are, therefore, squarely charged with doing everything to get their message across; the Qur'ān often speaks of a confrontation, on the Day of Judgment, between the prophets and their peoples: "We shall certainly ask those to whom the Messengers were sent and We shall equally question the Messengers, and We shall surely relate to them [what transpired between them] on the basis of sure knowledge and We are never absent" (7:7). The Prophet Muḥammad is urged to proclaim the Message without any "reservations in your mind" (7:1) and "loudly and uncompromisingly" (15:94; cf. also 5:67, and the confrontation of Jesus with Christians, 5:116-117). From every com-

munity a "Witness," i.e., the prophet sent to them, will be brought forth (16:84, 89; 28:75). The Prophet Muḥammad shall declare, "O my Lord! My people have abandoned this Qur'ān" (25:30).

From the earliest days of Islam, Muslims have held that this succession of Divine Messengers came to an end with the Prophet Muḥammad: "Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is God's Messenger and the Seal of the Prophets" (33:40). This interpretation appears correct, but to an outsider the belief appears dogmatic and in need of rationalization. Medieval Muslim thinkers, theologians, philosophers, and historians, have formulated several arguments to this end, mainly on the two different but allied bases that there has been an evolution in religion, of which Islam is the final form, and that an examination of the content of religions shows that Islam is the most adequate and perfect religion—a theme which itself has complicated and varied proofs.

Several Muslim modernists have held passionately that with and through Islam and its revealed book, man has reached rational maturity and there is no need for further Revelations. In view of the fact that man is still plagued by moral confusion, however, and that his moral sense has not kept pace with his advance in knowledge, in order to be consistent and meaningful, this argument must add that man's moral maturity is conditional upon his constantly seeking guidance from the Divine Books, especially the Qur'ān, and that man has not become mature in the sense that he can dispense with divine guidance. It must further be held that an adequate understanding of divine guidance does not depend any more upon "chosen" personalities but has become a collective function.

The proposition of the finality of the mission of Muḥammad does appear to be corroborated by the fact that no global religious movement has arisen since Islam—not that there have been no claimants, but that there have been no *successful* claimants. However, Muḥammad's being the last Messenger of God and the Qur'ān's being the last Revelation obviously place a heavy responsibility upon those who claim to be Muslims. Such a claim is not so much a privilege but an obligation; yet it has been taken by Muslims to be a privilege.

For God's envoys to mankind, the Qur'ān uses the terms *nabī* and *rasūl*. The *nabī*, "a giver of news," does not mean in the Qur'ān (as it mostly did in the Bible) "one who gives news about the future," but "one who gives news from God"; he comes from God to warn against

evil and to give good tidings to those who are good. Hence the terms "giver of good tidings" and "warner" appear frequently in the Qur'ān, particularly in the earlier period. *Rasūl* means "messenger," one sent by God to mankind—although in the Qur'ān, as we shall see in this chapter, this term is sometimes also applied to the Angel of Revelation, one who is sent by God to the Prophet and in this latter meaning the term *safara* (plural of *safir* meaning "ambassador") is also used once (80:15). Traditionally, Muslim Qur'ān commentators have made a distinction, saying that *nabī* means a divine envoy without a law (*sharī'a*) and, presumably, without a revealed book, while *rasūl* means one with a law and a revealed book.

Although such sharp distinctions are somewhat doubtful, since the Qur'ān describes some religious personages both as *nabī* and as *rasūl* (e.g., 7:158; 19:51, 54), there is no doubt that some distinction is intended, for example, in a verse like "And We did not send before you any *rasūl* or *nabī*" (22:52). It also appears that the frequency of use of *nabī* increases from the later Meccan period through the Madinan period. On the whole, *rasūl* does signify something weightier than *nabī*, for a *nabī* can be auxiliary to a *rasūl* as Aaron was to Moses (19:51, 53), although *rasūls* (or, strictly speaking, *mursals*, "the one sent") can be jointly commissioned (36:13, 16). Although prophecy is indivisible (2:136), not all prophets are equal, for "We have made some Messengers more excellent than others" (2:253; also see 17:55) and Muḥammad is exhorted to "be patient [under trial] as the Messengers with determination and steadfastness were patient" (46:35).

The most celebrated prophets are those whose own stories and those of their peoples have been told and retold in the Qur'ān. These include personages from the Bible, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Shu'aib (the Prophet of Midyan)—particularly the first four—and two from the Arab tradition, Ṣālih of the tribe of Thamūd and Hud of that of 'Ād; indeed, the two ancient Arab tribes were called by the Arabs *al-'Arab al-'āriba*, the "primal Arabs." This mixed prophetology presumably existed in Arabia before Islam, although the process whereby it was achieved and the period of the formation of the tradition are not known. But the existence of the tradition does show that the Arabs had come to achieve a prophetology that was independent of the Biblical tradition. The chronology of the major prophets as it can be ascertained from suras 7 and 11—which give their accounts

systematically, especially sura 11, which has a developed and patterned style—is: Noah, Hūd, Ṣālih, Abraham (whose contemporary is Lot), Shu'aib (who is placed "not much after" Lot and Abraham, 11:89), Moses, and Jesus. Except for Noah, the two Arabian prophets are more ancient than the entire Biblical tradition.

All Messengers have preached essentially the same message, that there is one, unique God to Whom alone service and worship are due, Who in the final analysis alone must be loved and feared. All others are "false gods" who can claim no share in the Divinity; all else is God's servant (*'abd*) and necessarily under His law and command. This is the Qur'ānic doctrine of *tauḥīd* or monotheism which we have tried to elaborate in Chapter I; the reader is urged to grasp as well as possible the meaning of this doctrine which is central to the Qur'ān—without which, indeed, Islam is unthinkable—yet which seems to have degenerated alike with non-Muslims and most Muslims into a mechanical formula and has lost much of the content, let alone the depth and intensity of the feeling, which this doctrinal preaching generates. For non-Muslims, unfortunately, one great obstacle to a true understanding and appreciation of the *tauḥīd* of the Qur'ān is the stereotyped belief that the Qur'ān "borrowed" it from the Jews, as though it were a matter of indifference whether one studies this or that form of monotheism!

Muḥammad, like all other prophets, is a "warner and giver of good tidings" and his mission is to preach—constantly and unflinchingly. Since this message is from God and is direly needed by men for survival and success, it has to be accepted by man and implemented. His preaching, therefore, is no conventional speech-making but has to "bring home" the crucial message. If the message is not accepted and the mission does not succeed, then the preacher may have discharged his duty, but God has definitely failed and humanity is doomed. But if God's purposes are frustrated and humanity doomed, has the preacher "discharged his duty"? His duty is to *succeed* in implementing the message in order "to reform the earth and remove corruption therefrom," and to institute an ethically-based social order wherein "good shall be commanded and evil prohibited" and "God's sovereignty shall be upheld."

This trend represents the basic thrust and the real élan of Muḥammad, both inside and outside the Qur'ān. He must be constantly on the move in order to persuade his people to accept the

Divine Message. "Warn your immediate clan" (26:214), the Qur'ān advises him on strategy. He does; but he cannot let pass any opportunity of influencing others as well, and particularly of enlisting the support of the powerful elder statesmen of the Quraish, who, once won to his cause, can turn the tide in its favor. He is a Messenger in a desperate hurry, for he sees his society in a desperate situation—"During the day, you perform a long out-reach, indeed" (73:7), the Qur'ān says to him, and "We are going to put upon your shoulders a heavy Call" (73:5); therefore, he is to "stand through the night—except a small portion of it—in intimate prayer to your Lord" (73:2). This "heavy Call" replaces that "burden which was breaking your back" (94:2-3), i.e., the tormenting realization of the acute problems in his society in particular and human society in general and his search for solutions through prayer and contemplation in the Cave of Hīrā': "He [God] found you probing in the dark and guided you to the right path" (93:7).

In his unrelenting endeavor to further God's cause, the Prophet was once reprimanded by the Qur'ān. While he was conversing with al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīra, an influential Meccan, he was approached with a question by a blind early convert to Islam, ibn Umm Maktūm. The Prophet was irritated at this intrusion and ignored the blind man. The Qur'ān said:

He frowned and turned his back that the blind man approached him. What do you know [O Muhammad!] if perchance the blind man has a pure heart? Or, he remembers God and this remembrance benefits him? As for him [the influential Meccan] who proudly considers himself self-sufficient, you seek him out on purpose—and it will do you no harm if he does not become pure. But as for him who comes running to you—and he fears God—you ignore him. Nay! This Qur'ān is but an admonition; whosoever will, let him take it. It is in noble documents, sealed and pure, in the hands of Divine Messengers [the Angels or Agencies of Revelation]. (80:1-15)

This restless and unhalting campaign had attracted some devoted followers, mainly from the lower and disenfranchised classes but a number also of well-to-do merchants and religiously sensitive personalities, some of whom had already been experiencing spiritual ferment. But since the message of Muḥammad apparently threatened the

larger vested interests of the Meccan mercantile aristocrats—in the economic field as well as the religious—most of them rejected it. Not long after the message began to be preached publicly, the persecution of Muslims started. The weaker classes in the new community particularly came under trials and dire pressures. The new message in many cases also divided families and set brother against brother and son against father—a phenomenon most disastrous for Arab tribal society, whose solidarity rested on blood ties and affiliation pacts. As the struggle went on, the Meccans became more and more perturbed and distressed and tried to persuade Muḥammad's uncle, Abū Ṭalib—who had not accepted his nephew's message but had given him protection—either to cause Muḥammad to desist or to withdraw his support from him; these repeated attempts were all unsuccessful.

At times this situation naturally affected the Prophet's own inner life and made him pause to think whether the whole effort was worthwhile, or had any real prospects of success. On the one hand was the utter conviction that the message was from God and that he must execute it—otherwise his own society was doomed to perish; on the other, the actual situation was so distressing and prospects of success so problematic that if a dilemma had real horns, this one surely did. We must remember that Muḥammad was not by temperament an aggressive or obtrusive man—indeed, a close study of his character reveals a naturally pensive, introverted, shy, and withdrawn personality who had been impelled by an inner urge born of an acute perception of the existential human situation to enter the arena of historic action. This explains why the Qur'ānic revelations, particularly in the early stages, are characterized by a staccato-like abruptness and consist of very short expressions like sudden volcanic outbursts or the passage of a huge river through a gorge. The Angel of Revelation spoke directly through Muḥammad's heart.

Under these conditions of exceptional strain, the Qur'ān expresses itself in various ways. The Meccans are frequently denounced as possessing no understanding; they are deaf and dumb and blind and their hearts are sealed (2:8, 18, 171; 6:39; 8:22; 10:42; 27:80) and other dramatized expressions to that effect, (e.g., 36:8-9); "they are like cattle, in fact, much more misguided" (7:179); "To Hell have We destined many of the jinn and the humans" (7:179). A second important channel of expression for the Qur'ān is to relate the situation of pagan Mecca to that of the peoples and cities of earlier prophets, which met

their doom when they refused to mend their ways in accordance with the invitations of their prophets.

A third important way of dealing with this mood of frustration, agony, and apparent helplessness is the consolation that the Qur'ān offers: "We have not sent down the Qur'ān upon you that you should be miserable" (20:2); "Will you, then, melt away your soul after them out of grief that they do not believe in this teaching?" (18:6); similarly in Madina: "Do not waste yourself away for the unrighteous ones" or "the disbelieving ones" (5:26, 68). In the later Meccan period, the prophet Shu'aib is reported as saying to his people, "O my people! I have delivered to you the Message of my Lord and I have admonished you; how shall I waste myself on a disbelieving people?" (7:93). Muḥammad is told that he is only a "Warner," "a reminder"; "your task is only to preach"; "you are not a warden over them"; "you cannot force them"; "God it is Who can make those hear whom He wills—you cannot cause the dead to hear in their graves" (35:22 11:12; 88:21; 3:20; 5:92, 99; 88:22; 50:45) "If God had so willed, He would have caused the whole world to come to guidance and made them one community" (5:48; 6:35; 10:99). In moments of unusual exasperation the Qur'ān tells him that if these people do not believe and mend their ways, they will be doomed, either before his eyes or after his death: "Either We shall show you something of the punishment which We have warned them of, or We shall bring your life to a term" (10:46; in the same vein: 13:40; 40:77; 43:41-42).

But these moments pass, and the basic élan of the inevitable success of God's cause and vindication of the Truth reasserts itself. Divine succor and final victory belongs to God's Messengers and those who support them: "We do, indeed, help our Messengers and the believers *in this life* as well as on the Day when the Witnesses shall stand up" (40:51). In sura 21, devoted to earlier prophets, one prophet after another is named and his vindication described; about Noah (with whom the series of great prophets begins) it is said, "We helped him against the people who had given the lie to Our signs" (21:77). So about Moses, Aaron, and their followers, "We gave them help and they were the victors" (37:116).

Earlier prophets had faced similar situations of exasperation and distress, until they cried out, "When *will* God's help come? Lo! God's help is at hand" (2:214). God's help is certainly conditional upon the efforts of the prophets and their followers—which is their help to God

(the Qur'ān recurrently emphasizes this mutuality; cf., for example, 47:7; 22:40, etc.)—but in the end victory will be theirs: "It is God's party that is victorious" (37:173; 5:56). And when success began to come, it was naturally seen as proof of the truth of the prophet's mission and as a harbinger of total success (for if in a situation of apparent helplessness, God did promise eventual success and vindication, there is all the more justification for success to be regarded as prefiguring further success). The crescendo is reached in the following verse, "These people [the pagans] want to extinguish God's Light by blowing at it with their mouths, but God will not have it otherwise except to complete His Light, even though the disbelievers dislike it" (9:32; also 61:8).

It is because of this basic line of thought concerning the final victory of good over evil that the Qur'ān refers constantly to the vindication of Noah, who was saved from the flood; of Abraham, who was saved from fire; of Moses, who was saved from Pharaoh and his hordes; and of Jesus, who was saved from execution at the hands of the Jews (hence the rejection by the Qur'ān of the crucifixion story). Muḥammad must equally be vindicated: he will not only be saved but his Message will be victorious. Hence he must proclaim the Message loudly and without reservations—even though he is by temperament a reserved and withdrawn person and the Message is revolutionary: "Proclaim loudly what you are commanded and become indifferent to [the machinations of] those who assign partners to God" (15:94); "This is a Book that has been sent down to you, so let there be no heaviness in your heart about it—that you should warn [people] by it" (7:2); "O Messenger! proclaim [unreservedly] what has been sent down to you from your Lord; for if you do not; you have not proclaimed His Message; and God will protect you from people" (5:67).

Finally, to this genre belong those verses and incidents where the Messenger is said to have contemplated some sort of compromise which his opponents pressed for soon after it became clear to them that he was totally serious about his mission. Under pressure from the Meccans and entreaties from his protecting uncle, Abū Ṭālib, his inclination is understandable, particularly in view of the hardship his movement had created for many families, his native sensitivity of character, and his inborn instinct of mercy, to which the Qur'ān also testifies abundantly: "You are no sorcery-stricken person, by God's blessing; you shall have [on the contrary] an unending reward—and

you are, indeed, of a great moral character" (68:2-4); "We have not sent you except as a mercy for the whole world" (21:107). Though grieving over the defeat in the Battle of Uhud, due to the clear mistake of his followers, he generously forgave them and the Qur'ān comments, "By the mercy of God you were lenient to them, for if you had been rough and harsh-hearted, they would have deserted you" (3:159).

These compromise rapprochements were repeatedly sought by the Meccans:

They wish you would soften up a little, so they would, too. (68:9)

They nearly seduced you away from what We had revealed to you in attributing to Us something else—in that case they would have befriended you. But for the fact that We made you firm, you had almost yielded to them some ground—in that case We would have given you a double punishment in this life and a double punishment in the hereafter, and you would have found no helper against Us. (17:73-75)

This last passage seems to be connected with a plot to expel the Prophet from Mecca, as is shown by the verse immediately following (17:76), "They almost drove you out from your hometown in order to expel you therefrom—in that case they would not have survived except for a little while." (There were, of course, other plots to kill him, for example, by burning him alive [21:68; 29:24] or by lapidation [11:91; 18:20; 19:46; 44:20; 36:18], or assassinating him in sleep [27:49], for it is certain that often the Prophet's own situation is mirrored in the accounts of earlier prophets. These plots are generally confirmed by the Prophet's biographers.) Further, in the same vein:

We never sent any Messenger [*rasūl*] or any prophet [*nabī*] but that when he thought, Satan intruded into his thoughts; but God erases [or abrogates] what Satan has intruded and then makes His own verses firm—God is knowing, wise. (22:52)

Are you perchance going to abandon part of what is being revealed to you and your breast is going to be straitened for it [for fear of non-acceptance], since they would say Why has a treasure not been sent down upon him or an angel has not come with him? (11:12).

But whatever fears or thoughts—or even actual gestures—of compromise the Prophet might make, they were soon "abrogated" or

"erased" by God, as verse 22:52 makes clear. The well-known story that after mentioning the pagan goddesses once (53:19-20), the Prophet described them as "exalted swans whose intercession [with God] is to be hoped for [*tilka' l-gharāniq al-'ulā, wa inna shafā'atahunna la-turtaja*]," only to abrogate these words in 53:21-23, is perfectly intelligible, for this incident occurred at a time of great trial and persecution for his followers, whom he had ordered to emigrate temporarily to Abyssinia. There are other indications that certain verses were replaced by others:

We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten but that We bring a better one in its place. (2:106)

God obliterates whatever [verses] He chooses and confirms others, for with Him is the Mother of all Books. (13:39)

And when We substitute one verse for another—and God knows best what He sends down—they say, You are but a forger; surely most of them are ignorant. (16:101)

For the Qur'ān, it is neither strange nor out of tune nor blameworthy for a prophet that he is not always consistent *as a human*. It is nevertheless as a human that he becomes an example for mankind, for his *average* level of conduct is still so high that it is a worthy model for mankind. Prophets are humans who must constantly struggle inwardly, but in this inward struggle truth and righteousness prevail; if prophets did not struggle and suffer inner travail, they could not become examples for other humans (for the humanness of Muḥammad and the other prophets, see, e.g., 3:79; 14:11; 18:110; 21:34; 41:6; 17:93-94). We are told (2:260) that Abraham, the exemplar of all prophets, asked God to "show me how You can revive the dead," and when God asked him, "Do you not believe?" Abraham replied, "Yes, but still I want to set my heart at complete rest [about the matter]." Similarly, Abraham arrives at monotheism by a gradual process of eliminating astral gods (6:76). This is a major reason why a human who is God or becomes God is simply anathema to the Qur'ān. To struggle and to succeed—the success being seen as coming from God—is the hallmark of a man of God.

Let us return to the "substitution" of certain verses for others. This is the original meaning of "abrogation [*naskh*]" in the Qur'ān; it does not mean the juristic doctrine of abrogation which later developed in

Islam and which is an attempt to smooth out apparent *differences* in the import of certain verses. We have already seen that certain verses were replaced by others at God's command, i.e., through Revelation. The Qur'ān makes it clear that when Meccans asked him to make adjustments in the Qur'ānic doctrine so that they could accept it, the Prophet told them that it was up to God, not him:

When Our clear verses are recited to them, those who do not expect to meet Us [on the Day of Judgment] say, Bring a different Qur'ān or change this one. Say, It is not up to me to change it by myself; I only follow what is revealed to me. I fear, if I disobey my Lord, the punishment of a mighty Day. Say, If God so willed, I would not be reciting it to you, nor would He be making it known to you—do you not reflect that I have lived amongst you [a long part of] my life before this? (10:15-16)

There is abundant evidence in the Qur'ān that while the Prophet did at times wish that developments would take a certain turn, God's Revelation went a different way: "Do not move your tongue with [i.e., ahead of] the Revelation, hastily anticipating it. It is upon Us to bring it together and to recite it—so when We recite it, let you follow its recitation. Then it is also Our task to explain it" (75:16-19).

That Muḥammad neither anticipated his becoming the Prophet, nor deliberately prepared himself to become one is also clearly demonstrated in several passages:

He who has laid the obligation of the Qur'ān upon you, will certainly bring you to a [satisfactory] end; say, My Lord knows best who has brought guidance and who is clearly astray. You never did expect that the Book would be given to you—it is only a mercy from your Lord. (28:85-86)

Even so did We send to you [or inspire you with] a spirit of Our Command [or Word]; you did not know before this what the Book is, nor Faith—We have made it a Light whereby We guide whomsoever We will. (42:52)

You did not recite before this [the Qur'ān] a Book, nor did you write it down with your right hand [like the scribes]—in that case the disbelievers would be able to doubt the authenticity of your Revelation. (29:48)

It is certain that Muḥammad's religious experience was sudden, as if a dead person had become alive: "Is he who was dead and whom We

gave life and a Light whereby he moves about among people, like him who wanders about in multiple darkness whence no exit is afforded him?" (6:123).

As we have tried to clarify in Chapters II and IV, the Qur'ān uses both naturalistic and religious idioms to describe *all* world phenomena, with no question of a contradiction between the two. On the contrary, the religious idiom *presupposes* the naturalistic language and, far from supplanting it, *envelops* it: winds and clouds do *cause* rains but it is God who *brings* rains and Who is working within the natural causes. The religious idiom is *ultimate after the demands of natural causation have been satisfied as explanatory formulae*. We would therefore have to say that in a naturalistic sense, Muḥammad did prepare himself for Prophethood (though not consciously), for he had an intense, natural, inborn sensitivity for moral problems confronting man; this sensitivity was increased by his having been orphaned so early in life. The tribe of the Quraish was the most powerful in Arabia; it first opposed him vehemently, but once it turned in his favor, Islam was truly launched on a world career.

All this naturalistic account is true, and yet the Prophet did not create his natural capacities any more than anybody else does; therefore, when all the natural factors collaborate towards a single, powerful *telos*, they must be referred to God. Besides, as we have already noted, Muḥammad had no conscious effort or desire to become Prophet, "If God so willed, I would not be reciting it to you (10:16)." For this reason, when Muḥammad's opponents asked him why he had come to be Prophet and "Why was this Qur'ān not sent down upon some big man in the two cities [of Mecca and Ṭā'if]?" (43:31), the Qur'ān gives both kinds of reply: "Do *they* distribute the mercy of your Lord?" (43:32)—which is couched in a religious idiom—and "God knows where to put His Messengership" (6:124)—which is cast in a naturalistic idiom. The Prophet himself was always only too conscious that his Prophethood was not of his own making and that even his natural capacities could not *cause* Revelation, which was a sheer mercy of God: "Do they say that he [Muḥammad] has forged [the Qur'ān] as a lie upon God? If God wills, He shall seal up your heart [so that there will be no more Revelation]" (42:24); again, "If We willed, We would surely remove the Revelation We have given you; then you will find no one who can help you with it despite Us!" (17:86).

Before we begin to talk about the nature and mode of Muḥammad's revelatory experience and the Qur'ān itself, we must discuss the celebrated event of the *Mi'rāj*, the "Ascension," of the Prophet, which according to tradition took place late in the Meccan period on the eve of his immigration to Madina. There is a highly detailed description of this experience—in fact, two experiences:

The one of powerful sinews and strong muscles [the agent of Revelation] taught him [Muḥammad]: he established himself on the highest horizon, then he drew near and descended so that he was at two bow-lengths or even nearer [to Muḥammad]. He then revealed to God's servant [Muḥammad] whatever he revealed. His [Muḥammad's] heart has not lied about what it saw—will you then doubt what he actually saw? He had seen him another time also when he had descended—near the furthest lote-tree where the Garden of Abode is located, when there enveloped the lote-tree what enveloped it! The Prophet's eye did not blink, nor did it go out of control—he witnessed one of the greatest signs of his Lord. (53:5-18)

It is obvious from this passage (1) that the reference is to experiences at two different times; (2) that in one experience the Prophet "saw" the Angel of Revelation at the "highest horizon," and he possessed extraordinary, almost suppressive strength, while on an earlier occasion he had "seen" him at the "furthest lote-tree—where the Garden of Abode is located"; (3) that instead of the Prophet "going up" in Ascension, in both cases the agent of Revelation "came down"; (4) that the experience was spiritual and not physical-locomotive: "his heart did not lie about what it saw"; (5) finally, that these revelatory experiences involved an expansion of the Prophet's self by which he enveloped all reality and which was total in its comprehensive sweep—the reference in both cases is to an ultimate, be it the "highest horizon" or the "furthest lote-tree."

This last point is confirmed by two other relevant passages:

Glory be to Him who caused His servant [Muḥammad] to travel one night from the Sacred Mosque to the "remotest Mosque" whose environs We have blessed, that We may show him of Our signs. (17:1) This [the Qur'ān] is the speech of a noble Messenger [the Angel of Revelation] who is powerful, who has a firm station with the Lord of the Throne, and who is obeyed and trusted There. Your companion

[Muḥammad] is not mad—he has seen him [the Angel of Revelation] at the clearest horizon and the latter is not niggardly [but generous] in giving news of the Unseen. (81:19-24)

Like the first passage, these two passages also mention something ultimate as the object of the Prophet's experience: the "remotest mosque" in the first passage and the "clear horizon" in the other. This latter passage bears certain striking resemblances to the first of the three passages in that both describe the agent of Revelation as a powerful being and speak about the "horizon" as the furthest point of experience. There may also have been more than two experiences because the "remotest mosque" mentioned in what is probably the latest of the three passages (17:1) is not spoken of in the other two. Since the experiences are spiritual in nature, the entities mentioned in these passages obviously cannot be physical, although it must be remembered that when a spiritual experience is of great intensity, where the distance between subject and object is almost completely removed, "voices" are "heard" and "figures" "seen" by the subject and the inner experience takes on a quasi-concrete form. We shall see presently that although the standard revelatory experience of the Prophet was a matter of the "heart", this experience nevertheless automatically took the form of words, as is the case with all spiritual experiences of great intensity.

Before we discuss in closer detail the nature of the Spirit or the agent of Revelation that descended upon Muḥammad, it would be well to point out the kinds of accusations that were hurled at Muḥammad by his opponents. He was occasionally called a soothsayer (*kāhin*: 52:29; 69:42); in pre-Islamic Arabia members of this profession were consulted for oracular statements on certain important matters. (The Qur'ān, of course, rejects this.) More often, he was called a poet (*shā'ir*: 36:69; 21:5; 37:36; 52:30; 69:41). Many Arabs believed a poet to be invaded by some spirit when he delivered poetry; the precise nature of that spirit is not known, but it most probably involved some disturbance of consciousness or the supervening of a supernatural consciousness (the root *shu'ūr* means consciousness or awareness beyond the ordinary). The Qur'ān strongly denies this and criticizes poets:

We have not taught him poetry nor is it proper for him—this is but a Reminder and a clear Qur'ān. (36:69)

Shall I inform you of those upon whom Satans descend? They descend upon every sinful liar. They listen carefully [to their inspiring Satans] but most of them tell falsehoods. Poets are followed by us wayward ones. Do you not see that they wander aimlessly in every valley and that they say what they do not do—except those who believe and do good deeds. (26:221-27)

“Wandering aimlessly in every valley” is probably a reference to the uncontrolled and extravagant poetic imagination as well as to the pre-Islamic poets’ uninhibited singing of their sexual freedom. This passage is not, therefore, a condemnation of all poetry but only of undisciplined imagination. The Qur’ān is itself highly poetical, particularly in its vivid and powerful diction and in the masterful artistry and expressiveness of its portrayals; but it is not poetry of the kind the pagans condemned in it.

Besides the accusations that he was a soothsayer or a poet (which seem peculiar to Muḥammad among all prophets in the Qur’ān), he is also called a sorcerer (*sāḥir*) or a victim of sorcery (*maṣḥūr*), and a man possessed with some evil spirit (*majnūn*); the last two, besides being frequently attributed to Muḥammad, are also attributed generally to all earlier prophets by their peoples (51:52). The Pharaoh especially accused Moses of being a sorcerer (also once of being possessed by an evil spirit [26:27]) and twice the Jews said the same of Jesus (5:110; 61:6). But besides Muḥammad, only Moses is said to have been called *majnūn*, and that only once. Against Muḥammad it is also urged that he was too well versed in certain earlier Books: That they should say, “You have studied well” (6:105), and that he is a “well-taught mad man” (44:14).

The Qur’ān, of course, sternly repudiates such charges: “Is *this* sorcery or is it, rather, the case that *you* are blind?” (52:15); “Your companion is not possessed—he has seen him [the agent of Revelation] on the clear horizon, who is not niggardly of giving news of the Unseen. Nor is this [the Qur’ān] the word of Satan the outcast [from heaven]—so where are you going? This is but a Reminder to the world” (81:22-27). The accusation of forgery we have already discussed in connection with the “substitution” of some Qur’ānic verses by others and we shall return to it again in Chapter VIII. A particularly disarming reply of the Qur’ān is: “Do they say that you have forged it? Say, If I have forged it, I shall pay for my crime; in the meantime, I am

quit of your crimes” (11:35). Here is a summary of most accusations with the comments of the Qur’ān:

They say: This is but a forgery which he [Muhammad] himself has concocted and certain other people have helped him in this. These people speak unjustly and lie. They say, These are legends of the earlier communities which he has got written down for himself and they are being dictated to him morning and evening. Say [O Muhammad]: Rather, He has sent it down Who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth; He is the Pardoning one, the Merciful one. And they say, What a [queer] Prophet! He eats food and goes about in the market place! Why has not an angel been sent down upon him, so that he might be a co-warner with him? Or, why has a treasure not been sent down to him, or [why has he not been given] a garden whose fruits he can eat? And the unjust ones say, You [Muslims] are only following a victim of sorcery. Look! What kinds of likenesses they coin for you—they have gone off the way and they cannot find one. (25:4-8)

The Meccans themselves, then, associated some kind of spirit—albeit a harmful one—with the Prophet. The spirit associated with him, however, was undoubtedly not of the kind his opponents attributed to him. It is the same Spirit, the agent of Revelation, that he “saw on the highest or clear horizon” and who revealed the Qur’ān to him. We shall next discuss the nature of this Spirit, the manner of Revelation, the effect of the Revelation in bringing certainty to the Prophet, and the result of the Revelation, the Qur’ān.

The term “angel” is, strictly speaking, not quite accurate for the agent of Revelation sent to Muhammad, for the Qur’ān describes the agent of Revelation, at least to Muḥammad, never as an angel, but always as Spirit or spiritual Messenger. Angels (*malak*, plural *malā’ika*) occur frequently in the Qur’ān as celestial beings who are God’s agents, carrying out all sorts of tasks from taking men’s lives to carrying God’s Throne; they can be sent to prophets (for example to Abraham, 11:70, and to Lot, 11:81) and they can be sent down upon true believers to give them courage (41:30), but the Qur’ān does not mention them as agents of Revelation. Indeed, God may also send Revelation (*wahy*) to angels themselves when they are sent to encourage believers in distress: “When [in the battle of Badr] God revealed to [or inspired] the angels [saying], I am with you, so give courage to the believers” (8:12). In the case of the great prophets preceding Muḥammad—Noah, Abraham, and Moses—God appears to address

them directly, although there is a general statement: "He casts the Spirit from His Command upon whomsoever He wishes of His servants" (40:15), from which we can infer that God's prophets had the benefit of God's Spirit, who gave them Revelation (cf. also 16:2). With regard to Jesus' mother Mary (although she was not a prophet—the Qur'ān does not mention any females as prophets), it is said that she was impregnated by "Our Spirit" (19:17; 21:91; 66:12); and God also infused into Adam, after building his carnal frame, His own Spirit (15:29; 32:9; 38:72). Believers, too, "on whose hearts Faith is firmly inscribed" are supported by God's Spirit (58:22). Jesus, however, was supported with the "Holy Spirit" [*rūh al-qudus*] (2:87, 253; 5:110) which is also the agent of the Qur'ānic Revelation (16:102). Jesus himself is described as "the Prophet of God, His Word that He cast into Mary and a Spirit from Him" (4:171)—presumably because his mother was impregnated by the Spirit.

There is no doubt that the agent of Revelation to Muḥammad is this Spirit. The Meccans, as we have seen, often asked of Muḥammad that an "angel be sent down upon him," to which the Qur'ān often replied that angels cannot be sent to humans as prophets (sometimes the Qur'ān 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: 8]). 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).

Yet, one should not think that the Spirit and the angels are wholly different. It is probable that the Spirit is the highest form of the angelic nature and the closest to God (cf. 81:19-21 quoted in connection with our discussion of the Prophet's Ascension). At all events, the Qur'ān mentions the angels and the Spirit together in several places: "[On the Night of Measurement] angels and the Spirit descend, with the permission of their Lord; with all commands" (97:4) (we shall speak about this Night below); "The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a day the span whereof is fifty thousand years" (70:4); "The Day [of Judgment] when the Spirit and the angels shall stand up in rows [in obedience]" (78:38); "He sends down the angels with the Spirit from His Command upon whomsoever He will of His servants" (16:2). Note that, in the last passage, the Spirit is not something additional to the angels but is something conveyed by them.

When Meccans repeatedly demanded that an angel descend upon

Muḥammad and the Qur'ān repeatedly repudiated such demands, it is probable that they were demanding something *they* could see and hear and possibly talk to, while what the Qur'ān continued to emphasize was that the agency of Revelation was the Spirit that came upon the Prophet's heart: "The Trusted Spirit has brought it [the Qur'ān] down upon your heart, that you should be a warner" (26:193); this Spirit is identified with Gabriel: "Say: whoever be an enemy of Gabriel, it is He [God] Who has brought him down upon your heart [or it is he, i.e., Gabriel, who has brought it, i.e., the Qur'ān, down upon your heart]" (2:97). That the Revelation and its agent were spiritual and internal to the Prophet is also testified to elsewhere in the Qur'ān, "If God so willed, He would seal up your heart [O Muḥammad!], so that no more Revelation would come to you" (42:24). Those Ḥadīth stories, then, where the angel Gabriel is depicted as a public figure conversing with the Prophet whose companions saw him, must be regarded as later fictions.

The view of some modern Western scholars that at first the Prophet thought he was being addressed directly by God and only later came to posit an intermediary agency of Revelation, must also be rejected, since the Spirit and the angels appear in very early suras like 97:4, while even later the Qur'an continues to employ language where God addresses him directly. As noted a while ago in the stories of earlier prophets God addresses them directly but the Qur'ān does speak of the agency of the Spirit in their cases also (40:15; 16:2). When we discuss the question of the manner of Revelation, we shall quote the categorical Qur'ānic denial that God may speak directly to a human. There is also a suggestion that the Spirit is the actual content of Revelation: "Even so have We revealed to you a Spirit of Our Command" (42:52; cf. also 40:15: "He casts the Spirit of His Command upon whomsoever He wills"). Perhaps the Spirit is a power or a faculty or an agency which develops in the Prophet's heart and which comes into actual revelatory operation when needed, but it originally does "descend" from "above." This is in perfect harmony with a well-known Islamic tradition according to which the entire Qur'ān was first "brought down" to the lowest heaven (i.e., the Prophet's heart, as thinkers like al-Ghazālī and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī would rightly say) and then relevant verbal passages produced when needed.

Be that as it may, we must attend to another important fact about the Qur'ānic idiom concerning Revelation. In five verses (16:2; 17:85;

40:15; 42:52; 97:4) where the Spirit is mentioned as descending or bringing something down, i.e., Revelation, it is associated with the term *amr*, which we have rendered as "Command". Except in 97:4 where this term is used alone, it is used with reference to God, and the construction employed is *rūh min amrinā* or *rūh min amrihī*. The preposition *min* cannot be read as "by," so that these words could mean, "the Spirit by Our [or His] Command," although it is tempting to do so (and the Qur'ān commentators have generally done so in the case of 17:85, which reads, "They [the commentators tell us the reference is to Jews] ask you [O Muhammad] concerning the Spirit; say, The Spirit is *by the Command of my Lord* and you have been given but little knowledge about it." (Al-Ṭabarī would read, "*belongs to the affair of my Lord*," i.e., the matter of the Spirit belongs exclusively to the domain of God and nobody else knows about it—a possible but hardly likely interpretation in view of the other cases of the same construction where this meaning is impossible.) Since the construction in this case is identical with that in the other cases, it must have the same meaning: "The Spirit of Our [or His] Command".

But what is this *amr*—rendered by us and many others as "Command"—whose Spirit descended upon Muḥammad or was brought down upon his heart by angels? This "Command" must be what the Qur'ān calls the "Preserved Tablet" or the "Mother of all Books." It is called the "Command" because although it contains everything, the essence of it is its imperatives for man. It is the essence of this Primordial Book or *amr* from which the Spirit or the Holy Spirit comes, enters into the hearts of the prophets, and bestows Revelation thereupon; or whence the Spirit is brought by the angels to the hearts of the prophets. On this interpretation also, the Preserved Tablet, the Source of all Books including the Qur'ān, is higher than angels as the Qur'ān ordinarily speaks of them.

But although one can make these technical distinctions based upon Qur'ānic statements, one cannot stick strictly to them: what the Qur'ān is essentially saying is that God's prophets or human Messengers are recipients of some special or extraordinary power which emanates from the ultimate source of all being and which fills the hearts of these prophets with something which is light whereby they see and know things the way others are not able to. At the same time, this power determines them upon a course of action that changes the lives of whole peoples. This undying and ever renewed Spirit is nothing other

than the Agency of all being and life. It is the guarantee that whenever the human race sinks into the moral morass of its own follies, there is always hope for its rescue and renewal. The question now is of the manner of Revelation.

It does not belong to any human that God should speak to him [directly] except by Revelation [i.e., infusion of the Spirit] or from behind a veil [i.e., by a voice whose source is invisible] or that He should send a [spiritual] Messenger who reveals [to the Prophet] by God's permission what He wills—and He is exalted and Wise. And even so have We revealed unto you [i.e., infused in your mind] the Spirit of Our Command—you did not know before what the Book is nor what Faith is, but *We* have made it a light whereby *We* guide whomsoever *We* will of our servants, and *you*, indeed, guide [people] to the straight path. (42:51-52).

What primarily concerns us here is the first part of this passage. What it tells us is that God never speaks directly to a human but He may infuse a Spirit in the Prophet's mind (as the next verse of the passage says of Muḥammad), (1) which makes him see the truth and utter it ("Say: This is my path—I call people [to God] on the basis of a clear perception" [12:108]; "He [Muḥammad] speaks not from his own desire—it is but a Revelation vouchsafed to him" [53:3]), or (2) which produces an actual mental sound, not a physical sound, and an idea-word, not a physically acoustic word; or (3) which takes on the form of a Messenger agent "giving" the Revelation to the Prophet. Whatever the agency of Revelation, however, the true revealing subject always remains God, for it is He Who always speaks in the first person and it is He Who speaks even in this passage, informing the Prophet that He has sent the "Spirit of Our Command to you."

That the Prophet actually mentally "heard" words is clear from 75:16-19: "Do not hasten your tongue with it [the Revelation] in order to anticipate it. It is Our task to collect it and recite it. *So when We recite it, follow its recital*, and then it is also Our task to explain it" (see also 20:114). It is also clear that, in his anxiety to retain it or to "anticipate" it in a direction different from that of his Revealing Spirit, the Prophet moved his tongue of his own ordinary human volition, the intrusion of which was repudiated by God. This necessarily implies the total "otherness" of the agent of Revelation from the conscious personality of Muḥammad in the act of Revelation. But it is equally clear

that the words heard were mental and not acoustic, since the Spirit and the Voice were internal to him, and there is no doubt that whereas on the one hand, the Revelation emanated from God, on the other, it was also intimately connected with his deeper personality. Thus the popular traditional accounts of the utter externality of the agency of Revelation cannot be accepted as correct.

It is not always easy for a person who works with the endlessly complicated twists and enmeshing folds of the materials of history, trying to bend it to a clear and long-range course, to take decisions that are cut and dried. It is easy for an idealist to depreciate or ignore the complications of historical forces and to swim superficially on their surface, without bending history to a definite course at all; it is easier still for a non-idealist to get lost in the folds of historical forces and imagine short-sighted gains to be prodigious. While in his ordinary moments, Muḥammad struggled, often successfully, with the forces of history, it was the Spirit of Revelation that enabled him to take definitive decisions on certain issues of major moment where, as we have already seen, as an ordinary human he might falter—despite his exalted natural character (of which, as we have also seen, the Qur'ān gave him a clear certificate). The simple truth is that nowhere in human history is there another man who combined so uniquely and effectively in his person both the idealist and realist factors as did Muḥammad, thanks to the unique working of the Spirit of Revelation. The dictates of this Spirit decided clearly and firmly not only between what was true and what was false but also, as a consequence, what was to be done, what was not to be done, and what was to be undone. This is why the work of this Spirit was called *furqān*, “clearly demarcating line” (2:185; 3:4; 25:1), a name which, to an extent, is also bestowed upon previous Revelations and miracles (21:48; 2:53).

The term *bayyina* (“decisive proof”) which, as used for a miracle, we discussed in Chapter IV, is also used in the Qur'ān to mean the Revelatory Spirit—either as a revelatory power within a Prophet or as a divine Messenger to the Prophet:

What about him [the Prophet Muhammad] who is on a clear proof [i.e., who possesses the revelatory power in the sense of potential Revelation] from his Lord, which is then actually recited by a Witness [the Divine Messenger] from Him, and before him is already the Book of Moses as an exemplar and a mercy? (11:17)

The idea is that the Prophet has a potential Revelation in him, a *bayyina*, a decisive proof for himself that he is God's Prophet, and then the divine Messenger or the active Spirit of Revelation actually recites it to him. In the same sura (11) certain other prophets claim the same for themselves: Noah says to his people, “What if I am on a clear proof [*bayyina*] from my Lord and He has [also] given me a Mercy [i.e., an actually verbalized Revelation] from Him but you are being blinded to it?” (11:28; similarly, the Prophet Sālih, 11:63; cf. also 11:88 in the same vein).

The Revelation or the Spirit of Revelation is then the “clear proof [*bayyina*].” We are told:

Those who have disbelieved from among the People of the Book [the Jews] and those who associate partners with God [Arab pagans] will not desist [from their enmity towards Islam] until a clear proof [*bayyina*] comes to them [also—as it does to Muhammad], viz., a Messenger from God who recites [to them] Holy Documents containing Precious Writings. (98:1-2)

This certainty and unshakable assurance (*bayyina*) is such that on its basis the religious personalities of the Old Testament are dissociated from the Jewish and Christian communities and claimed for Islam—just as, all prophets have been Muslims: “Or, do you say that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the [prophets of the] Tribes were Jews or Christian? Do you know better, or God?” (2:140).

It is the Faith generated by such certainty that is “knowledge [*ilm*]” and the Qur'ān often contrasts this kind of conviction with other kinds of belief (*ẓann*: 2:78; 45:24; 3:154; 4:157; 6:116, 148; 10:66, etc.) or guess (*khars*: 6:116, 148; 10:66; 43:20; 51:10). We have already seen in connection with Abraham that there are grades of Faith; the zenith is reached in the Faith produced by Revelation, while at the other extreme, people devoid of Faith claim Faith—like the Bedouins: “The Bedouins say, We believe; say [to them]: You should say, We have surrendered [*aslamna*]; since Faith has not yet entered your hearts” (49:14); or like some Jews who had simulated Faith: “When they came to you [O Muslims!] they said, We believe, but the fact is that they had entered [Faith] with disbelief and they went out of it with disbelief, and God knows well what they concealed” (5:61).

Thus, when this assurance of the Spirit of Revelation came, all

thoughts of any compromise or gestures thereto were abandoned, "Say: O disbelievers! I do not serve what you serve, nor are you going to serve what I serve . . . to you, your faith, to me, mine" (109:1-6). We have already quoted 12:108, where the Prophet says that he calls people to his way to God "on the basis of a clear perception," and 6:122, where he is described as a man who was dead but to whom God had given new life. Further, "Say: O my people! go on with your works as you are, I will also continue to do [mine]" (6:135; cf. also in almost identical terms 11:93, 121; 39:39). Again, "Each works according to his own mode of conduct but your Lord knows best who is on a better guiding path" (17:84); and the numerous statements telling the opponents, "Wait [to see who is right] and I shall also wait" (6:158; 7:71; 10:20, 102; 11:122; cf. 32:30). This constitutes the total parting of the ways—the true and the false: "There is no compulsion in [matters of] faith, for guidance has now become clearly distinguished from misguidance" (2:256), but at the same time it has become clear that truth shall triumph over falsehood: "Say: The Truth has come and falsehood has lost ground, for falsehood is, indeed, vanishing" (17:81). (It should be noted that this last verse goes well back into the Meccan period.)

The Qur'ān was first revealed (at least, as we have pointed out, in an implicit or embryonic form—out of which full-fledged details were developed gradually and as occasion arose) on a certain night in the month of Ramadān:

We have sent [the Book] down on a Blessed Night, since We were going to warn [mankind]. In it [i.e., that Night] every matter of Wisdom is decided upon—as a Command from Us, for We send Messengers as a Mercy from your Lord. (44:3-6)

The month of Ramadān wherein the Qur'ān was sent down as guidance for mankind and [its verses] as clear proofs for [this] guidance and as *furqān* [i.e., as distinguishing clearly truth from falsehood]. (2:185)

The wording of verse 44:3-4 "We sent it down on a Blessed Night wherein every matter of wisdom is decided upon" bears a striking resemblance to that of sura 97 concerning the "Night of Determination or of Accounting [*qadr*]" from which we quoted in our discussion of the Spirit of Revelation:

We have sent it [the Qur'ān] down in the Night of Determination, and

who has told you what the Night of Determination is? The Night of Determination is better than a thousand months. In it [i.e., this Night] the angels and the Spirit descend with [decision upon] every matter, with the permission of their Lord. It is all peace till the break of dawn. (97:1-4)

This night, held to be between the 26th and 27th of Ramadān, is solemnly observed every year by Muslims, many of whom spend it in devotional prayers. Since we know that the Qur'ān took about twenty-three years to be revealed, the "descending" of the Qur'ān in that night has been held by many Muslim commentators to mean that the Qur'ān was sent as a whole "to the seventh heaven" and thence it was for the most part revealed in passages as occasion arose. What in some sense corroborates this statement about the revelation of the Qur'ān as a whole is 94:1-3: "Have We not opened your heart and relieved you of the burden which was breaking your back?"; "relief from the burden" was then effected once and for all (although another burden—that of executing the Message—was put in its place). The spirit of Revelation in terms of potentially total Revelation had made its contact with the Prophet's mind.

Although no subsequent event of Revelation was easy, for the Qur'ān itself was a burdensome Call, not only in its content but even in its genesis, nevertheless, this first event of "breaking the ground" ensured that the Message as a whole had a definite and cohesive character. The recurring Qur'ānic term *tanzīl*, as the commentators assure us, often means gradual and intermittent Revelation, or "sending down." The Meccans objected to this gradual revelation of the Qur'ān: "Those who disbelieve say: Why has the Qur'ān not been sent down upon him [Muḥammad] all at once? So it is, in order that We give strength to your heart and [also] We have arranged it in an order" (25:32), i.e., it has been arranged according to the occasion. Moreover, "In truth have We sent it down and in truth has it come down. . . . A Qur'ān that We have sent intermittently that you may recite it to people at intervals, and We have sent it down in successive Revelations" (17:105).

The Qur'ān testifies both to the crushing burden and to the power of its own Call: "If We had sent this Qur'ān down upon a mountain, you would have seen it humbled and split asunder through fear of God: these are likenesses We cite for men so that perchance they might reflect" (59:21). Again, "If it were possible for a Qur'ān that moun-

tains be moved by it or the earth rent or the dead spoken to [by its power, this Qur'ān would have done it]" (13:31). After all, it was this Message which brought Muḥammad back to life (6:123). Even though the Qur'ān often complains that pagans do not respond to it, yet it also avers that they did not want their people to listen to it for fear they would be influenced by its powerful appeal: "Those who disbelieve say, Let you not listen to this Qur'ān; rather, confuse the hearers, maybe you will win [against Muḥammad]" (41:26). It was because of this power that the pagans are said to be "like asses fleeing from a tiger" (74:50). The enemies of Muhammad were often left speechless: "When you see them, their [well-built] figures impress you, but when you listen to what they have to say, they are no more than sticks piled one upon the other" (63:3).

We have said that the Prophet mentally "heard" the words of the Qur'ān; but he also mentally "saw" the Qur'ān being recited by the Spirit of Revelation—"Holy Documents containing Precious Books" (98:2). Again, "Say: this Qur'ān is but an admonition; whosoever will may take admonition from it. [It is contained] in Noble Documents, exalted and pure in the hands of Divine Messengers [Angels or Spirits of Revelation], who themselves are noble and pure" (80:11-15). These are the divine Messages that emanate from the "Preserved Tablet" in the form of the Qur'ān (85:21-22). This "Preserved Tablet," from which all revealed Books take their rise, is also what is called the "Hidden Book" (56:78) and the "Mother of all Books [*umm al-Kitāb*]" (13:39, from which also comes the confirmation or cancellation of revealed verses [and Books]).

There is a vast literature in Islam known as *i'jāz al-Qur'ān* setting out the doctrine of the "inimitability of the Qur'ān." This doctrine takes its rise from the Qur'ān itself, for the Qur'ān proffers itself as the unique miracle of Muḥammad. No other revealed Book is described in the Qur'ān as a miracle in this way except the Qur'ān itself; it follows that not all embodiments of Revelations are miracles, even though the event of Revelation itself is a kind of miracle. The Qur'ān emphatically challenges its opponents to "bring forth one sura like those of the Qur'ān" (2:23) and "to call upon anyone except God" to achieve this (10:38; cf. 11:13, which is probably earlier). There is a consensus among those who know Arabic well, and who appreciate the genius of the language, that in the beauty of its language and the style and power of its expression the Qur'ān is a superb document. The linguistic

nuances simply defy translation. Although all inspired language is untranslatable, this is even more the case with the Qur'ān.

As we shall further develop in Chapter VIII, the Qur'ān is very much conscious that it is an "Arabic Qur'ān" and, the question of ideas and doctrines apart, it appears certain that the claim of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān is connected with its linguistic style and expression. Unfortunately, non-Arab Muslims do not realize this enough; while they correctly assume that the Qur'ān is a book of guidance and hence may be understood in any language, they yet not only deprive themselves of the real taste and appreciation for the Qur'ānic expression but—since even a full understanding of the meaning depends upon the linguistic nuances—also cannot do full justice to the content of the Qur'ān. It is extremely desirable and important that as many as possible of the non-Arab educated and thinking Muslims equip themselves with the language of the Qur'ān.