



The Historical Character of the Biblical Revelation

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[Jean-Marie Lustiger](#)

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What I mean when speaking of the Biblical Revelation is Judaism - not only the one of ancient times, but also the whole rabbinical tradition - and Christianity across the multiplicity of its ancient as well as contemporary forms. Including Islam under the same appellation would involve complex controversies, which I do not have the time to open here.

When claiming that the biblical tradition is different from all other religions, I distance myself from the most widespread approach in the science of religions - the one that has built itself as academic knowledge since the 19th century. This *Religionswissenschaft* produces a generic concept of religion. It examines the constituent elements of any religion, such as "myth and rites," or "the sacred and the profane." It will also study the role of religion in the functioning of society, and so on. This method is grounded on the initial hypothesis - which is not criticized and therefore no more established - that the category of "religion" is universally relevant, whatever the contents of each single faith. Examining the contents of the religions that base themselves on the Biblical Revelation, however, shows how different they are from all other faiths. I suggest we study one of the characteristics of this difference - its historicity.

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Let us focus on two decisive moments of the Biblical Revelation:

- the creation of the world,

- and the gift of the Law to Moses.

1. The creation of the world

What is the meaning of this "beginning," this "*bereshit*," this "heading," in which "God Elohim created the heavens and the earth"?

These first words describe the encounter between the Uncreated and his creature, to which he is going to give to exist. Such an encounter is literally impossible to imagine, for it is beyond man's ability to conceive. But what is even more remarkable in this story is that God's creative act is performed within a strict and significant chronology: the seven days.

All the other cosmogonies or narratives of the genesis of the world and of man organize a series of mythical events to explain the causes of everything. In the biblical narrative the days obey no other necessity than their numerical order: "the first day," "the second day"... This way of naming them is that of the Hebrew language, as the Gospels in Greek keep it when they speak of "the first day of the week" (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2.9; Luke 24:11; John 20:1), which we call "Sunday."

Moreover, while one particular work characterizes each single day, the seventh one is presented as the day of the completion of the work of God Elohim - the seventh day when he no longer works, but which he "blesses and makes holy."

Time is thus structured by the encounter of God and man, whom he has created "in his image and resemblance." Time is inhabited by both God and man. The seventh day appears both as the presence of eternity within time, since God then rests, and as the presence of time within eternity, since God introduces man into the latter when he orders him to share his rest.

What characterizes this narrative, thus, is to join time and eternity - eternity within time and time within eternity - as the creature born from the creative act is joined to the Uncreated.

The numerical, and therefore abstract, appellation of each single day is marked by the words of the uncreated Creator. What he does is described in the present tense, which signifies his eternity within time. God Elohim creates - *bara*, in the present tense - while the order he gives afterwards is expressed in the future tense.

So the Biblical Revelation inserts into historical time the beginning that springs from God's eternity.

What is more, in these very first lines of the Bible, God from his eternity gives to man a commandment that the latter, created in God's "image and resemblance," is to carry out freely. This is how, by obeying the word he has heard and received, he will humanly take part in the divine act that has given him to exist and that invites him to share God's rest.

Here again, time becomes the place where man is made holy by freely carrying out the commandment he has received, thus becoming similar to God, the only Holy One: "You must be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). From the beginning man is to listen and act. This is how he fulfils his human vocation and opens the time of history. God will never cease, in the course of this history, to reveal himself through what he does for man; and in the course of this history, man will never cease to discover God by carrying out what God commands him to do.

What can thus be clearly deciphered in the very first page of the Bible is made fully manifest at the time of the flight from Egypt and the gift of the Law.

2. The gift of the Law

By revealing himself, God transforms the one to whom he chooses to reveal himself.

This is the other decisive moment of the Biblical Revelation which we must reflect upon: when God

gives his commandments to his people. Here we come across another area of human nature, which is commonly called "moral conscience." The gift of the Law on Mount Sinai resumes into the Covenant the commandment that has originally been given to man as the light of his life. Furthermore, by teaching Israel all of all that he commands, God reveals all of his holiness.

This enlightens the historical character of the Biblical Revelation in several ways. I will underscore two of them, basing myself on the words of Leviticus I have quoted: "You must be holy, because I am holy."

- These commandments are given to Israel as the mission to become holy. Is this a specific mission? It certainly is. Is it an exclusive mission? It is, up to a certain point, since it makes of Israel the sacerdotal people. This mission destines this people to carry out the sacerdotal intercession for the whole world, for all humankind, century after century. It can be said that Adam received from God, his Creator, the mission of being the priest of the world by "ruling" over the whole creation.

Adam is to glorify God for the whole creation, to give him thanks, to do his will. However, because of their sin, men shy away from this mission.

By calling Israel, God then establishes his people as priest for the world and in the world. The uniqueness of this people is then the tool of God's universal design.

By giving the commandments God entrusts his design of salvation to the care of the people. This is the hidden key to human history, which it is right to call "sacred history."

- The sentence, "You must be holy, because I am holy," also leads to the conclusion that the commandments reveal to us who God is, since he orders man to act as he himself does. We can then legitimately wonder how carrying out the commandments allows man to discover the One who gives them.

I will take only one example: "Thou shalt not kill." It may sound naïve to ask, "How does God himself obey his commandment?" Anyway, it can be granted that God gives this commandment because of what he is and what he does for man. Indeed, he is the Creator, who gives life. He is not the author of death. This is why he gives the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." The cause of death is man, when he refuses life, that is to say submission to the divine Law. Man still has to find out what "giving life" by refusing to kill means for himself.

So, as he obeys the Law in the way he acts, the faithful man manifests in history who God is. This historical character gives a unique importance to the moral dimension of men as "created in God's image and resemblance." The significance of the current debates over ethical issues becomes obvious here. Those debates originally date back to the fascination with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And there is no way out unless it is shown by compliance with the commandments.

The pattern of the Revelation that I have just sketched out is inherent in the Christian faith. The teachings of the New Testament exactly fall within the scope of the Biblical Revelation. It should be enough here to mention the Prologue of the Gospel according to John, which blends into one and the same meditation the creation of the world, the work of Redemption, and the light given to men by God's Word.

The historical character of the Christian faith, as expressed in the New Testament, is made even more striking by the tension towards the eschatological accomplishment of history that fosters its hope.

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The Revelation that makes itself part of human history goes through the believers' individual choices. It spreads itself along the tormented history of God's fidelity and the infidelity of those he has chosen. This history reveals an infinite mercy - the one that reaches Moses' ears when he asks God to reveal his Name: "The Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, long-suffering, ever faithful and true, remaining faithful to thousands, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7).

Misunderstandings are therefore unavoidable when the historical Revelation crosses the ways along which men, precisely because of the gift of creation, search for the significance of their lives and of the world of which they take possession. Those misunderstandings are countless and unending, and they are all the more tragic as they keep on luring the very ones whom God calls to be the witnesses of his Covenant.

The ones who have received the Biblical Revelation have discerned and strive to discern in any other religious experience a way for man to express his resemblance with God's in whose image he is made. But there they can also discern their own resistance to what God asks from them, and their own temptations to sink into idolatry.

They can thus measure how both far from and close to the other religions they are, while remaining sure, thanks to the faith that has been given to them, that God loves all humans: He created them out of love, for "his love endures forever" (Psalm 136:1).

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