

QS 19 Q 17:85

17.85 They ask you about the soul.

Say: "The soul belongs to the realm of my Lord, and of knowledge you have been granted but little."

17.85 Et ils t'interrogent au sujet de l'âme, – Dis: «L'âme relève de l'Ordre de mon Seigneur». Et on ne vous a donné que peu de connaissance.

سورة الإسراء
وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّيِّ وَمَا أُوتِيْتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا (85)

Dye

Le propos est *mis en scène* (*wa-yas'alūnaka 'an*), comme un discours de Dieu au Prophète, fournissant la réponse à une question qui lui aurait été posée. Il me paraît impossible de savoir s'il s'agit seulement d'un procédé littéraire et rhétorique, ou si cela traduit un événement réel (l'identité des questionneurs restant de toute façon mystérieuse).

Le passage est très obscur, *rūh* et *amr* étant très polysémiques (étude classique sur ce dernier terme : Baljon 1958), et pouvant donc recevoir des significations différentes selon les contextes. On peut le rapprocher de Q 16:2 et Q 40:15, et y voir une brève explication de la vision coranique de la prophétie. *Rūh* ne désigne pas ici le souffle de vie (Q 15:28), l'ange Gabriel (Q 19:17), ou le contenu du message inspiré (Q 42:52), mais bien plutôt l'esprit de Dieu censé parler à travers les propos du prophète (à rapprocher, bien sûr, de l'Esprit saint, cf. Q Baqara 2:87, 253). *Amr* (qui peut avoir une connotation eschatologique, mais pas nécessairement dans le présent contexte) me paraît simplement désigner ici l'ordre, la décision, divine – qui peut s'exprimer dans une parole (cf. par exemple Q 3:59). La préposition *min* peut être ambiguë : elle paraît signifier ici l'origine (l'esprit vient de l'ordre divin, il descend selon la décision divine).

On rencontre sans doute ici une référence à une conception de la prophétie très courante dans l'Antiquité : une seule et même essence divine, l'Esprit saint, s'est personnifiée dans les prophètes ou les a inspirés, jusqu'à trouver en Christ sa révélation pleine et entière (ce qui pourrait expliquer que le terme *rūh* apparaisse souvent dans des versets relatifs à Jésus). Mais on trouve aussi l'idée selon laquelle le bénéficiaire de l'Esprit, après Jésus, sera le Paraclet, ou que le Paraclet parlera à travers ses propos : ainsi, Dieu envoie, accorde l'Esprit, à qui il le décide (Q 40:15 ; Voir aussi Hebr/Hé 2:3).

Kropp

There are two difficult terms *ruh* (*allāh*) and *amr* (*allāh*). There is the suspicion that both of them are ambiguous and that their actual meaning in the context may be

very different, changing from verse to verse, e.g., *rūh* is simply the breath of God in one passage, a separate being bearing this breath or the message of God in another. The same is true for *amr*. In the case of *amr*, the Semitic cognates (in Aramaic) play an even more important role. As the phonetic shape in many cases does not indicate a foreign or a loan word this fact has to be established by the semantic part: Not an easy task in the case of the Qur’ān where allusion and not explicit narration prevails and to which we do not have parallel contemporary texts in Arabic.

Reynolds

Rūh is usually translated “spirit/Spirit” (Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, Arberry, Hilali-Khan,) or “soul” (Shakir, Sher Ali, Hamidullah). Asad is typically idiosyncratic: “divine inspiration.” *Amr* is translated “command” (Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, Sher Ali, Asad: “...comes at my Sustainer’s behest,” Hamidullah) or “thing” (Hilali-Khan). The Latin paraphrase of Marracci reflects the traditional *sabab*: “Et interrogabunt te *Judei* de Spiritu (idest de anima). Responde: Spiritus est ex negotio Domini mei (idest ex iis rebus, quarum scientia spectat ad Deum) neque datum est vobis de scientia, nisi parum.” Others raise the possibility that *amr* is something else entirely. Paret translates this verse: “Man fragt dich nach dem Geist. Sag: Der Geist ist Logos (amr) von meinem Herrn. Aber ihr habt nur wenig Wissen erhalten.” Behind this translation is a notion found already in Jeffery, “In its use in connection with the Qur’ānic doctrine of revelation, however, [amr] would seem to represent the Aramaic *mēmrā*” (2007: 69). Rudolph comes to a similar conclusion: “Hier zeigt sich deutlich eine Emanationskette Gott – *amr* – *rūh*, die mit der abgestuften Trinitätslehre eines Origines, wo der Logos aus Gott, der Geist aus dem Logos emaniert” (1922: 41).

Rippin

Bell (1991: I, 475 [=v. 87]) views this verse as “detached” but I don’t quite see why; but then he is not quite sure what to make of the verse either. Spirit here could be the spirit of revelation connected to knowledge (*‘ilm*) and the command (*amr*).

Sirry

This passage presents the *rūh* (spirit) as a divine mystery. One may ask: Why did the question of *rūh* become an issue? Who were “they” asking such a question in the passage? O’Shaughnessy, in his extensive study on the meaning of *rūh* in the Qur’ān (*The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*), classifies the passage as belonging to the third Meccan period (according to the chronology of Nöldeke and Blachère). According to O’Shaughnessy, while in the first Meccan period, the *rūh* is often presented as a personal being, in the second period it is often associated with divine creative power (for instance, in the case of creation). Due to the shift from the personal to the impersonal use of the *rūh*, O’Shaughnessy argues, Muham-

mad's adversaries at Mecca "asked him what he meant by the term" (1953: 34). O'Shaughnessy also discusses some possible sources (Biblical and post-Biblical) for the Qur'ānic use of the term *rūh* either in its personal or impersonal senses. The fourth use of the *rūh* in Medina is connected with the spirit of holiness (*rūh al-quds*), which, according to O'Shaughnessy, "appears to have come increasingly under Jewish and Christian influence" (1953: 42). Although this is a possible explanation, it is also possible that *rūh* had been used for various meanings in the pre-Qur'ānic time, and the Qur'ān simply follows the course, not necessarily in chronological order. The Qur'ānic phrase "the *rūh* belongs to the command (*amr*) of my Lord" seems to suggest mystery. However, in three other places (Q 16:2; 40:15; 42:52) *rūh* is linked to *amr* in a more straightforward manner.

Stewart

The presentation of questions in this manner suggests that these were actual questions presented by the Prophet's contemporaries and not hypothetical queries or casuistry. Such questions and their answers support the view that the Qur'ān was the result of a process of community building or a collective work in which many individuals played a role, as Neuwirth and Gilliot have suggested. The answer in this case, like those regarding the time of the Day of Judgment, is a disclaimer, deferring to the superior knowledge of God. It is important to realize, though, that in prophetic and other religious discourse, the denial of authority is one of the main methods of claiming authority, because he who conveys God's words is not speaking for himself but rather speaking for the higher power who must be obeyed. "The duty of the messenger is only to deliver the message" may be as sure a claim of religious authority as the prophets' repeated phrase in Q 26: "Fear God and obey me!"

Tesei

According to a tradition first recorded in the *tafsīr* ascribed to Muqātil, Q 17:85 would have been revealed alongside Q 18:9–26 and 18:83–102 as an answer to three questions through which the Meccan polytheists would have tested Muḥammad's prophetic authority. Such questions would have been suggested by the Jews of Medina. The historical value of this traditional account is highly doubtful (cf. Wansbrough 1977: 122–9; Reynolds 2010: 203–4). Indeed, the whole situation described seems to be written around the same verses the tradition is supposed to explain. Furthermore, one of the three passages referred to (i.e., Q 18:83–102) has been successfully traced back to a Syriac work composed after 629 CE (cf. van Bladel 2007b). This external evidence invalidates the "Meccan" dating implied by the tradition (cf. Tesei 2011). Finally, it might be observed that, even if we accepted that the account of the "prophetic test" is based on a real historical record, the attribution of the questions to either the Meccan polytheists or the Jews of Medina would still be suspicious. In fact, all three subjects which Muḥammad would have been asked about

concern religious and literary themes mostly widespread among Christians: the (Holy) Spirit; the miracle of the Sleepers of Ephesus (certified only in Christian sources); the legend of Alexander's wall against Gog and Magog (occurring in 7th c. Syriac apocalypses). Thus, even if the introducing sentence *wa-yas'alanūka 'an al-rūh* reflected a religious quarrel that really occurred, this should have more likely involved a Christian audience rather than Jewish or polytheist opponents. Whatever it may be, despite the reconstruction of the traditional account, Q 17:85 seems to reveal an interest for Christian themes. In fact, it is worth remarking that in the Qur'ān, the word *rūh* often occurs in verses concerning Jesus and Mary (e.g., Q 2:87; 2:253; 4:171; 5:110; 19:17; 21:91; 66:12).

Toorawa

This verse features another (see QS 11 above) *yas'alanūka* ("they ask you about") phrase. It is certainly possible that this forms part of a public disputation, and that therefore it is a *response* to a question. But it is also possible that this phrase deployed in *anticipation* of a question, preemptively as it were: "They will ask you about X, tell them X is..."

The similarity of the deployment of *rūh* ("spirit"), *amr* ("command") and *rabb* ("lord") in "*quli l-rūhu min amri rabi'*" ("Say/respond: The spirit comes (?) by the command of my lord") here is similar to the deployment of the same words in Q 97:4: *tanazzalu l-malā'ikatu wa l-rūhu fihā bi-idni rabbihim min kulli amr* ("the angels and the spirit descend in it, by permission of their lord [fulfilling] every command"). This echoing is worthy of deeper consideration. As for the vexing word *rūh*, could it mean/be God's will, i.e. the expression of it, or even simply revelation in an active sense, rather than "spirit"? That meaning seems tenable in all its Qur'ānic occurrences, even when it is *rūh al-qudus* (literally, "spirit of the holy,") though in three of those four instances, the connection with Jesus suggests that if we are dealing here with revelatory will, then it is one that was breathed into Jesus, at the moment of divinely willed conception. The traditional connection of *rūh* and *rūh al-qudus*—frequently imprecisely translated "the Holy Spirit"—with the Archangel Gabriel is not an impossible one, but that the *rūh* itself actually is Gabriel seems to me unlikely.

Zellentin

The divine origin and measured dispensation of knowledge, here (only *qalīlan* "a little" has been given) and throughout the Qur'ān, invites a discussion of the role of the "gnostic" tradition. It should be noted that the heresiological construct of "Gnosticism" has been thoroughly deconstructed by Williams (1999) and others, and when reading the Qur'ān, we are not even reminded of such movements as Valentinian and Sethian Gnostics (see King 2005). What we encounter in the Qur'ān, on the one hand, is the broad Christian consensus that *gnosis*, divine knowledge, is indeed part of the revelation (see also Dye's comment on this passage). On the other hand,

the Qur’ān’s concept of ‘ilm, here and throughout the book, has affinities to the respective pervasive concept of what the *Clementine Homilies* understand as *Gnosis* (especially in Books 2 and 3), which in turn contains anti-“Gnostic” tendencies shared with the rabbinic tradition (as suggested in my comments on QS 4).

The relationship of the Qur’ān to Gnosticism deserves an independent study, yet we can note already here that the *Clementine Homilies*, like the Qur’ān, associate the spirit with knowledge (as well as with reasoning and the fear of God, *Clementine Homilies* 20:2). This is of course a notion shared with the broader Christian tradition as well, yet more specifically, the *Homilies* describe Jesus as a faultless prophet who knows the “hidden things” and the unseen, and as the true Prophet who *always* foreknows through the spirit (ibid. 3:14). The Holy Spirit, in the *Homilies*, comes from “the divinity of the Spirit that is in (the Prophet)” (ibid. 2:10, see also 3:17). We may hence better understand the Qur’ān’s linkage between the Spirit and knowledge, and especially the type of scarce knowledge in the passage at hand, when reading it in light of the respective Clementine and the Qur’ān’s prophetology. Divine knowledge is concrete, it relates to the hidden things and the future, and will be bestowed upon the believers and withheld from the unbelievers through the true prophet, Muḥammad in the Qur’ān and Jesus in the *Homilies* (see also Tesei’s comments on this passage on the affinity of Jesus and the spirit).

A broader inquiry into this shared concept of knowledge could allow us also to appreciate the differences between the way in which the concept of knowledge is employed in both texts: for example, the *Homilies*, as mentioned above, construct true *gnosis* explicitly as a rejection of the putative “Gnosticism” of its adversaries, the Qur’ān seems more focused simply on conveying its concept of ‘ilm rather than defining it against diverging conceptions of it.