



Abdolkarim Soroush's Theory of Revelation: From Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge to Prophetic Dreams

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ABSTRACT

The Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush has recently developed an account of revelation referred to as the theory of Prophetic Dreams. This article seeks to analyse this theory and its relation to two earlier theories developed by him (that of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge and that of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience). In addition, it explores whether the theory of Prophetic Dreams has any roots in classical Islamic literature and the ideas of Muslim theologians, mystics and philosophers in the pre-modern era. Finally, it discusses the implications of Soroush's theory of Prophetic Dreams for issues related to exegesis and theology, suggesting that it has an important bearing on Islamic theological discourses. The article aims to contribute to scholarly understanding of the development of Soroush's thought by investigating aspects of his project that have not hitherto been explored.

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Introduction

Since the late 1970s, Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) has been a prominent figure in the Iranian intellectual and academic sphere. His academic activities after the 1979 Iranian revolution have included writing books and articles, giving lectures in mosques and universities, teaching at various universities in Iran and translating a number of Western works of philosophy. In the post-revolutionary environment, Soroush gradually gained popularity among university students and became the most influential religious reformer, especially between the late 1980s and the early 2000s.¹ While living in exile, Soroush was employed as a visiting scholar in the area of Islamic studies at Harvard and Princeton universities, while also travelling within the United States and Europe to deliver lectures on subjects related to Islam, Iran and the modern world. One of the most significant contributions Soroush has made in these areas during the past few years is his theory of Prophetic Dreams, which seeks to explain how Muhammad received prophetic revelations and contributed to the formation of the Qur'an.

This article aims to explore the development of Soroush's thought. It will not deal with his anti-Marxist stance, political theories, discussions concerning philosophy of science, or political ideas about the West and modernity in post-revolutionary Iran, as these

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¹Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, 146.

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topics have been discussed at length by other scholars.² Instead, this article will focus on the development of Soroush's thought concerning the revelation and interpretation of the Qur'an, or religious knowledge more generally. Soroush's intellectual career (insofar as it directly concerns matters of religion) after the Iranian revolution of 1979 can be divided into three main phases. The first began in the late 1980s when he produced a series of articles that were later published as a book entitled *Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge*. This theory, which argues for the contingency and historicity of religious knowledge, 'made Soroush not only the most influential Muslim intellectual in Iran but also one of the most persuasive intellectuals in Iranian modern history'.³ The second phase began in the early to mid-1990s, leading to the publication of his *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*. In this work, Soroush argued for the contingency of the Qur'an, and stated that the Prophet played a significant role in shaping the content of the Qur'an. Soroush continued to develop this understanding of revelation during the 2000s. From the mid-2010s, he began to develop a new theory of revelation, arguing that revelation is a type of prophetic dreaming. This phase of Soroush's ideas about revelation culminated in the publication of his book, *The Word of Muhammad, The Dream of Muhammad* in 2018.

While some scholars have undertaken studies of Soroush's theories of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge and the Expansion of Prophetic Experience,⁴ there has so far been no study dedicated to investigating his recent theory of Prophetic Dreams. Drawing on a rich array of primary source materials in Persian, as well as references to speeches delivered by Soroush in the past few years, the present article fills this lacuna. It first briefly explains the theories of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge and the Expansion of Prophetic Experience. It then explores various aspects of Soroush's theory of Prophetic Dreams and the extent to which this theory is rooted in the history of Islamic theology. It finally considers whether the third phase of Soroush's thought about revelation should be considered a continuation of, or a break with, the two earlier phases of his intellectual career.

The theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge

Soroush's theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge demonstrates the limits of human knowledge with respect to understanding sacred texts, including the Qur'an. Religious knowledge, according to this theory, is influenced by other modes of knowledge and thus is in continuous transformation. The theory includes three important pillars.

Its first pillar concerns the distinction between sacred scripture and religious knowledge. According to Soroush, while sacred scripture is rooted in the divine, its interpretation, or religious knowledge, is mundane, time-bound and human-constructed. For Soroush, 'human beings' understanding of religion is flawed. Religion is sacred and

²See, for example, Rajaei, *Islamism and Modernism*, 225–31; Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism*, 116–17.

³Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism*, 136.

⁴See, for example, Dahlén, *Islamic Law*; Fletcher, 'Methodology'; Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, 155–61; Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*; Amirpur, 'Expansion of Prophetic Experience'; idem, *New Thinking*, 140–67; Hashas, 'Abdolkarim Soroush'; Akbar, 'Abdolkarim Soroush's Approach'; Shadi, *Philosophy of Religion*.

heavenly, but the understanding of religion is human and earthly'.⁵ Soroush states that all Islamic disciplines such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), ethics and theology (*kalām*) are constructed by humans, and they contain no sacred element.⁶ Along similar lines, all the interpretive endeavours that have emerged in the course of Islamic history (such as the *tafsīr* literature) should be considered human works. Soroush concludes that humans can never fathom God's intent and thus should never speak on behalf of God.

The second pillar of Soroush's theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge involves the argument that the various modes of knowledge, including natural science, philosophy and religious discipline, are interrelated and influence each other: 'Change in our epistemic knowledge in one area will lead to change in our understanding and knowledge in another'.⁷ Accordingly, humans' understanding of religion in general, and of the Qur'an in particular, inevitably changes when our extra-religious knowledge changes. That is, the evolution of religious knowledge depends on changes in the human understanding of the world, and on the emergence of new social values and political rights. The contraction and expansion of human knowledge thus leads to the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge; and so with the passage of time, it is inevitable that new interpretations of the Qur'an will appear – interpretations that are appropriate and relative to the circumstances in which different interpreters live.

The third pillar of Soroush's theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge concerns issues related to hermeneutics. Soroush believes that the discipline of interpretation is, by default, subject to an interpreter's prior knowledge, meaning that interpretations of the Qur'an are always based on certain pre-understandings (*pīsh-dānesteh*) and can never take place with an empty mind (*zahn-e khālī*) and without pre-conceptions or pre-assumptions.⁸ Throughout his work, Soroush refers to several examples in order to prove his claims. Noting that all commentators on the Qur'an (*mufasssīrūn*) brought their preconceived ideas to their interpretation, Soroush argues, for example, that the late Shī'a scholar Allameh Tabataba'i's (d. 1981) defence of the philosophical concept of causality, and his philosophical orientation in general, played a role in his interpretive method.⁹ Soroush is unconcerned about whether Tabataba'i's interpretive reasoning is true or false, but rather seeks to demonstrate Tabataba'i's long-lasting philosophical impact on the latter's approaches to the Qur'an. For Soroush, a philosopher follows a different approach to reading the Qur'an from that of a jurist or a mystic because their understandings are based on different pre-conceptions and pre-understandings. In this sense, Tabataba'i's approach is different from that of a jurist such as Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, given the existence of two different pre-understandings in their writings and the latter's Hadith-oriented understanding of Islam.¹⁰ In another example, when exploring the ideas of the contemporary Iranian interpreter Mahmoud Taleqani and his 'scientific interpretation (*tafsīr-e 'elmī*) of the Qur'an', Soroush states that Taleqani regarded the Qur'an as a book of great relevance for understanding contemporary problems, finding in it answers to scientific problems that only emerged

⁵Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy*, 31. By 'religion', Soroush refers to the sacred scripture – i.e. the Qur'an in the context of the Islamic tradition.

⁶Soroush, *Qabd va basf-e te'orik-e shari'at*, 248.

⁷*Ibid.*, 167.

⁸*Ibid.*, 357.

⁹*Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 239–40.

later.¹¹ That is, Taleqani's scientific interpretation of the Qur'an was based on the assumption that modern scientific discoveries, such as the existence of micro-organisms, can be found in the text.

The theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience

In his theory of the Expansion of the Prophetic Experience, Soroush goes one step further in the sense that he incorporates the historicity of religion and of the Qur'an in his project. His argument here is not limited to the historicity of religious knowledge, but rather is oriented towards the historicity of the Qur'an and the Prophet's impact on the content of revelation. In this theory, Soroush rejects the traditional account of revelation, according to which the Prophet is reduced to a channel for the transmission of God's Word. He criticizes this understanding of revelation insofar as 'it chooses to see the Prophet as Gabriel's mimic'.¹² Soroush treats the Qur'an as 'the product of the human experience of an exceptional man [Muhammad]'.¹³ For Soroush, the idea of revelation should be dealt with as part of a larger discussion of Muhammad's personality and the development of his prophetic career. The Prophet's personality, as Soroush puts it, 'was both the receptacle and the generator, both the subject and the object of his revelatory experiences'.¹⁴ Any changes in Muhammad's personality resulted in changes to his revelatory experiences. For Soroush, the Qur'an is intimately bound up with the Prophet's feelings:

If you read the Qur'an you feel that the Prophet is sometimes jubilant and highly eloquent while at other times he is bored and quite ordinary in the way he expresses himself. All these things have left their imprint on the text of the Qur'an. That is the purely human side of revelation.¹⁵

Therefore, Soroush argues, the Prophet's character, his likes and dislikes, as well as his understanding of the world shaped by the surrounding Arabian culture, played a key role in the creation of the Qur'an. In order to demonstrate how the circumstances of Muhammad's life played a significant role in the formation of the Qur'an, Soroush asks:

If they [the Arabs of Medina] had not accused of Aisha of having an adulterous relationship, would we have the verses at the beginning of the al-Nour Sura [Q 24]? If the war of the confederate tribes had never occurred, would we have the al-Ahzab Sura [Q 33]? If there had been no Abu Lahab or if he and his wife had not displayed enmity towards the Prophet, would we have the al-Masad Sura [Q 111]?¹⁶

Unlike the theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge, which only emphasizes the humanness and the historical nature of religious knowledge, this theory states that the Qur'an itself has a human character; it was shaped within a particular context and its message reflects the Prophet's historical personality. For Soroush, in

¹¹Ibid., 220–1.

¹²Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 329.

¹³Ibid., 324.

¹⁴Ibid., 11–12.

¹⁵Soroush, 'Word of Muhammad'.

¹⁶Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 17.

addition to the role of the Prophet's personality and feelings in shaping the content of revelation, the Prophet played a key role in articulating his revelatory experiences:

The Prophet is also the creator of the revelation in another way. What he receives from God is the content of the revelation. This content, however, cannot be offered to the people as such, because it is beyond their understanding and even beyond words. It is formless and the activity of the person of the Prophet is to form the formless, so as to make it accessible ... the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses.¹⁷

This suggests that the Prophet did not simply receive a word-for-word verbal revelation: 'God wrote Muhammad and Muhammad wrote the Qur'an, just as God created the bee and the bee produced honey. And honey was the product of revelation'.¹⁸ The metaphor of a honeybee is important in this context as it is mentioned in the Qur'an itself (Q 16.68–69). Although God wills the honey to be made, He has made it accessible to humans by creating the honeybee: 'Instead of speaking about a parrot, the Qur'an speaks about a bee and considers the latter, not the former, to be the symbol of receiving revelation'.¹⁹

To emphasize the human characteristics of the prophetic revelation (and so too that of the Qur'an), Soroush states: 'I don't think that he [Muhammad] knew more than the people around him about the earth, the universe and the genetics of human beings. He did not possess the knowledge we have today'.²⁰ He is, however, quick to state that this 'does not harm his [Muhammad's] prophethood because he was a prophet and not a scientist or a historian'.²¹ Soroush goes on to challenge the orthodox idea of the infallibility of the Qur'an: 'What the Koran says about historical events, other religious traditions and all kinds of practical earthly matters does not necessarily have to be true'.²² Thus, not only is religious knowledge fallible, but the Prophet's words and the Qur'an too could be fallible in some respects. This is because it is not only our human understanding of the Qur'an, but also the very message or content of the Qur'an itself that is historical. For Soroush, many scientific statements in the Qur'an, such as those related to astronomy, are not essential to the Qur'an and Muhammad's prophetic mission.²³ Rather, they belong to the accidental aspects of the Prophet's mission, and thus can be replaced by modern theories.

The theory of Prophetic Dreams

In recent years, Soroush has gone beyond the theory of the Expansion of the Prophetic Experience and argued that the Qur'an is a product of prophetic dreams. This recent theory has a number of features, including: (1) Muhammad experienced revelation (*wahy*) in the form of visions and images, and thus *wahy* included not only an auditory dimension but also a significant visual one; (2) the Qur'an was worded by the Prophet himself, which means that God does not speak directly in the Qur'an; (3) the Qur'an

¹⁷Soroush, 'Word of Muhammad'.

¹⁸Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 329.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 137.

²⁰Soroush, 'Word of Muhammad'.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 78, 300.

is a report of the dreams of the Prophet and is thus a 'dream-letter' (*khāb-nāmeḥ*); and finally (4) many terms that appear in the Qur'an (such as 'moon', 'sun', 'tree', etc.) should be interpreted or codified, and should not be taken literally, since what appears in a dream is not necessarily similar to its equivalent when we are awake. The language of dreams (*zabān-e khāb*), according to Soroush, is different from that of the waking language (*zabān-e bīdārī*).

To begin explaining these various aspects of Soroush's theory, it is relevant to see how he refers to the Qur'an. Soroush refers to a number of qur'anic verses to show that the Prophet experienced revelation in the form of visions and images, rather than in an auditory manner as most commentators believe. For example, he refers to qur'anic verses about resurrection, arguing that such verses demonstrate how the Prophet visualized the scenes of the Day of Resurrection in his prophetic dreams.²⁴ The Qur'an states in Q 39.68–75:

The Trumpet will be sounded, and everyone in the heavens and earth will fall down senseless ... It will be sounded once again and they will be on their feet, looking on. The earth will shine with the light of its Lord; the Record of Deeds will be laid open; the prophets and witnesses will be brought in. Fair judgement will be given between them ... Those who rejected the Truth will be led to Hell in their throngs. When they arrive, its gates will open ... [But] those who were mindful of their Lord will be led in throngs to the Garden. When they arrive, they will find its gates wide open, and you [the Prophet] will see the angels surrounding the Throne, glorifying their Lord with praise.²⁵

According to Soroush, in this passage, it is the Prophet who is visualizing the horn being blown, and seeing everyone on the earth falling down dead. The earth is viewed by the Prophet in a shining form; the records of people's deeds are brought forth before them, and they are then judged. As Soroush states, it is not God who speaks here. Rather, it is the Prophet who is present (*ḥāzer*), as observer (*nāẓer*), reporter (*gozāresh-gar*) and narrator (*rāwī*), and it is the Prophet who reports what he has visualized in his dreams.²⁶ In other words, it is the Prophet who visualizes some scenes about the resurrection – scenes which he then puts into words. Such verses are therefore the Prophet's words, not the Words of God:

It is as if the Prophet who is standing in the midst of an eventful scene in which prophets and angels are moving around before his eyes; and [it is the Prophet] who is viewing and narrating the opening of the doors of heaven and hell.²⁷

According to Soroush:

The Prophet was not instructed to tell his people that there would be a resurrection, a judgement, a heaven and a hell, but he himself saw all visions [related to these issues]. The Prophet himself saw people of paradise exchanging their cups of wine (Q 52.23), and [the] skin of the people of hell being roasted and replaced with new skin (Q 4.56).²⁸

In one of his lectures on the theory of Prophetic Dreams, Soroush stated that 'qur'anic verses related to resurrection and the afterlife are the most visual (*taṣvīrī-tarīn*) part of

²⁴Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 90–4.

²⁵Translations of all qur'anic passages are taken from Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*.

²⁶Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 91.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 92.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 87.

the Qur'an'.²⁹ The Qur'an presents a pictorial image of what the Prophet witnessed in his dream of the Day of Judgement: for example, the sun is shrouded in darkness, the stars are dimmed, the mountains are set in motion, pregnant camels are abandoned, wild beasts are herded together and the seas boil over (Q 81.1–6).³⁰ All these signs, which are recorded in the Qur'an, are visual and illustrative, and were not simply received as auditory revelations. According to Soroush, other signs of the Day of Judgement, such as those described in the following verses, were also received as visual revelations: 'Watch out for the Day when the sky brings forth clouds of smoke for all to see' (Q 44.10–11); 'We shall bring a creature out of the earth' (Q 27.82); and 'On that Day, We shall let them surge against each other like waves and then the Trumpet will be blown and We shall gather them all together' (Q 18.99). Scenes described in the Qur'an, such as visible smoke filling the sky, the bringing forth of creatures from the earth and the collapsing and arising of people as the horn blows do not have an auditory nature. Rather, the Prophet seems to have visualized these vivid scenes in his dreams.

Soroush continues that there are many other verses in the Qur'an that show how the Prophet reports different scenes both as an observer and as a narrator.³¹ These include: sending down the angels on the night of decree (Q 97.1–4); the angels striking the faces and backs of unbelievers when they are dead (Q 47.27); the angels prostrating before Adam (Q 2.34); and the setting of the sun in a spring of dark mud (Q 18.86). The Prophet also saw in his revelatory dream eight angels bearing the Throne of God (Q 69.17).³² These expressions in the Qur'an are so pictorial and graphic that we cannot escape the idea that they took place in the Prophet's dreams, Soroush states.³³ He concludes: 'Instead of saying that in the Qur'an God speaks and the Prophet hears, we should state that in the Qur'an Muhammad is observer and narrator'.³⁴ Thus, *wahy* should no longer be understood as what the Prophet heard, but instead as what the Prophet observed in his dreams.³⁵ Therefore, the Prophet was not merely a mouth-piece of God in the process of revelation; rather, he played a key role in the formation of the Qur'an.

To show that many verses of the Qur'an have a 'visual' (*taṣvīrī*) nature which stems from the dreams of the Prophet, Soroush claims that the Qur'an is replete with paradoxical terms. These include, for example, the *young* boys who will never grow *old* (Q 56.17), the *seas* filled with *flames* (Q 81.6), the *wines* that cause no *headaches* or *intoxication* (Q 56.18–19) and a *garment* of famine which God will make unbelievers *taste* (Q 16.112) rather than wear. When referring to the punishments of hell which will be inflicted upon its inhabitants, the Qur'an speaks of the tree of *zaqqūm* – a *tree* that grows from a *blazing fire* (Q 37.62–67), another paradoxical expression. Apart from the fact that all these expressions are pictorial and graphic, it is only in dreams that such paradoxes make sense. According to Soroush, it is only in a dream that we can perceive young boys who never get old, or seas filled with flames.³⁶ These scenes, rather than

²⁹Soroush, 'Ta'bīr-e ma'ād'.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 88.

³²Ibid., 106.

³³Ibid., 108–9.

³⁴Ibid., 88.

³⁵Ibid., 113.

³⁶Ibid., 134–5.

being communicated by someone else (i.e. Gabriel) in an auditory manner, were seen by the Prophet in his revelatory dreams. For Soroush:

What seems to be inconsistent or improbable, or seems impossible to take place [in a waking situation], is probable and consistent in the dream. ... It is in dreams that we can see ourselves occupying the heights and depths simultaneously; in a standing and in a moving position; in the water and in the fire; fully covered and naked [simultaneously] ...³⁷

To demonstrate that the Qur'an is the work of the Prophet rather than of God, Soroush states that it presents a contradictory picture of God.³⁸ This approach coheres with his idea that God is beyond human imagination and has no worldly characteristics, meaning that God does not in fact speak at all.³⁹ According to Soroush, the Qur'an refers to God as having anthropomorphic characteristics; He sometimes becomes angry and takes revenge, and at other times is merciful and compassionate, showing sympathy towards His creatures. So long as we regard the Qur'an as the product of God's infinite knowledge, we shall be unable to understand why God is described in different/contradictory terms. Soroush suggests that, in order for Islamic theology to resolve these contradictions, we should understand all these expressions as reflecting the Prophet's experience of God alone.⁴⁰ In other words, they are the Prophet's understandings or experiences of God, rather than actual descriptions of God. God has other characteristics in the Qur'an, such as being cunning (*makra*, Q 7.99), mocking (*Allāhu yastahzi'u bihim*, Q 2.15) and derisive (*sakhira llāhu minhum*, Q 9.79). According to Soroush's theory, it is not God who is cunning, derisive and mocking; rather, the Prophet experienced and depicted God with these forms and attributes. Leaning on Ludwig Wittgenstein's distinction between 'seeing as' and 'seeing that', Soroush argues that the attributes of God as described in the Qur'an should be approached as the Prophet 'seeing as', meaning that the Prophet experienced God in a particular form, rather than that God really has the particular features described in the Qur'an.⁴¹ Accordingly, the Qur'anic verses that speak of God in anthropomorphic terms do not describe God's actual characteristics, but rather how the Prophet experienced God and perceived Him in his prophetic dreams. Along similar lines, it is the Prophet's perception that the fate of all creatures depends on the Will of God. The Prophet saw God as responsible for sending the winds (Q 25.48), and the rain (Q 31.34), igniting fires (Q 56.71) and taking control of people's souls (Q 39.42). Muhammad experienced everything as glorifying God (Q 13.15); he even saw thunder exalting God and praising Him (Q 13.13).⁴² In all these events, God, as Muhammad understands Him, controls the fate of humanity and the world.⁴³

The Qur'an is, therefore, the work of the Prophet; it does not provide us with an objective description of the world, or even of the actual relationship between God and the world, but rather reveals how such a relationship was viewed by Muhammad: 'Through [reading] the Qur'an we can reveal Muhammad's world, and can understand

³⁷Ibid., 140.

³⁸Ibid., 211.

³⁹Soroush, 'Ta'bīr-e ma'ād'.

⁴⁰Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 211.

⁴¹Ibid., 170.

⁴²Ibid., 110.

⁴³Ibid., 240.

how he viewed the world'.⁴⁴ In fact, 'If the Prophet had had other experiences, the Qur'an would have taken another form'.⁴⁵ This idea is similar to what had already been stated in Soroush's theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience. There, he argued that 'if the Prophet had lived in another cultural environment', many statements of the Qur'an, 'would probably not have been part of his message'.⁴⁶ This point will be explored in further detail later.

Soroush uses his theory of revelation to argue in favour of a new approach to interpreting the Qur'an. According to him, 'When we read the Qur'an, we should not forget that we are reading a dream letter composed not in the language of waking life but of dreams'.⁴⁷ The language of dreams is mysterious and enigmatic and requires decoding: 'If we consider the language of dream equal to that of conventional language, we make a grave mistake'.⁴⁸ Accordingly, for Soroush, terms such as 'fire', 'sun', 'garden', 'water', 'book' and so on, which appear in the Qur'an, do not necessarily convey their conventional meanings.⁴⁹ Thus, when the Qur'an states, 'When the sun is wrapped up [in darkness], And when the stars fall, dispersing ...' (Q 81.1–2), it is not literally referring to the sun or the stars as conventionally understood.⁵⁰

To explain this, Soroush refers to Joseph's dream as explained in the Qur'an. The Qur'an states in *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Q 12) that Joseph recounted to his father that he dreamt of eleven stars and the sun and the moon all bowing down before him – a dream that later came true: '[A]nd took them up to [his] throne. They all bowed down before him and he said, "Father, this is the fulfilment of that dream I had long ago"' (Q 12.100). Soroush states that Joseph really visualized the sun, the moon and the stars in his dream, but they do not correspond to the actual moon, stars and or sun; they symbolize a later event. That is to say, such terms, which are also used in other parts of the Qur'an, have meanings other than their conventional meanings.⁵¹ When Joseph was in prison with two other men, they told him about dreams they had had: the first prisoner described how he saw himself pressing grapes in his dream, and the second prisoner described how he saw himself carrying bread on his head as birds picked at it. Joseph interprets the first dream to mean that the prisoner will serve wine to his king and interprets the second dream as meaning that the prisoner will be crucified (Q 12.35–41). Also, Joseph interprets a dream about seven fat cows eating seven lean ones as meaning that Egyptian society would experience seven good years followed by seven bad years of famine.⁵² In all these cases, the images of the moon, the sun, the stars, grapes and the fat and lean cows were really seen by dreamers, but their actual meanings had to be interpreted, as they were by Joseph.

Other examples can be examined too. The Qur'an (Q 22.2) states: 'On the Day you see it, every nursing mother will think no more of her baby, every pregnant female will

⁴⁴Ibid., 222. For a similar conclusion, see Shabestari, 'Qerā'at-e nabavī az jahān', although Shabestari does not arrive at such a conclusion through a theory of dreams. I have discussed Shabestari's theory of revelation elsewhere. See, in particular, Akbar, 'Towards a Humanistic Approach'; idem, 'A Contemporary Muslim Scholar's Approach'.

⁴⁵Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 226–7.

⁴⁶Soroush, 'Word of Muhammad'.

⁴⁷Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 95.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 96.

⁵¹Ibid., 97.

⁵²Soroush, 'Ta'bīr-e ma'ād'.

miscarry, you will think people are drunk when they are not'. When the Qur'an says in this verse that, on the Day of Resurrection, every pregnant woman will abort her pregnancy, this statement should not be interpreted literally, although such a scene appeared in Muhammad's revelatory dream. This could mean that the Day of Resurrection will be of tremendous significance and immense horror, the likes of which humans have never seen.⁵³ In another verse, when the Qur'an states: 'Those who take usury (*ribā*) will rise up on the Day of Resurrection like someone tormented by Satan's touch' (Q 2.275), it means that the Prophet visualized those who charge *ribā* being beaten by Satan. However, the verse should not be taken literally and needs to be interpreted. It could, for example, refer to the wretched conditions that those who accept *ribā* will experience in the after-life.⁵⁴ Similarly, when the Qur'an says that some Jews became apes and pigs due to their disobedience (Q 5.60), the Prophet really saw such a scene in his revelatory dream; but we should not conclude that such an event really took place. The verse should be (re)interpreted since apes and pigs in the world of dreams are not like those in waking life; these images must refer to something else in the real world, just as the fat and lean cows refer to something else in the story of Joseph.⁵⁵

The importance of dreams in medieval Islamic literature

Before exploring other aspects of Soroush's theory and its implications, we may consider the extent to which his understanding of the phenomenon of revelation is rooted in the literature produced by pre-modern or early-modern Muslim scholars, and the extent to which the importance of dreams was emphasized in medieval Islamic literature.

Reports about the importance of true dreams are found in canonical Hadith collections. Muhammad is said to have received 'true dreams' (*ru'yā ṣādiqa*) before the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an. According to a Hadith in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī, 'The commencement of the Divine Inspiration to God's Apostle was in the form of true dreams which came true like bright daylight, and then the love of seclusion was bestowed upon him'.⁵⁶ That is, before Muhammad went into seclusion in the cave of Ḥirā', he received inspiration from God in the form of true dreams. The canonical Hadith literature is replete with instances in which Muhammad is reported to have received true dreams during his prophetic mission.⁵⁷ It is even reported that some Companions of the Prophet experienced true dreams.⁵⁸ In medieval Arabic literature, dreams are also described as a potential vehicle for communication with God in the period after the Prophet's death. On the eve of his death, Muhammad is reported to have said that, while his prophecy would soon come to an end, there would remain 'tidings' (*mubash-shirāt*). When people asked about the nature of these tidings, the Prophet replied that they would be 'true dreams', emphasizing that dreams of believers are a part of

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 220.

⁵⁵Ibid., 117.

⁵⁶Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Vol. 1, Book 1, no. 3.

⁵⁷To mention a few cases in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: the Prophet is said to have travelled to the holy land (Jerusalem) in his dream (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Vol. 2, Book 23, no. 468); when resting in the valley at Muarras in Dhul-Hulaifa, Muhammad was addressed in a dream: 'You are verily in a blessed valley' (ibid., Vol. 2, Book 26, no. 610); the Prophet dreamt of 'moving a sword and its blade got broken' – a dream that symbolized the Muslim defeat at the battle of Uhud (ibid., Vol. 4, Book 56, no. 818).

⁵⁸See Edgar, *Dream in Islam*, 9.

prophecy.⁵⁹ Muhammad is also reported to have said that the true dreams of a faithful believer are one of the forty-six elements of prophecy.⁶⁰ Similar to Sunnī Hadith collections and literature, in the Shī'a tradition true dreams are described as being a part of the canon of revelation and prophecy.⁶¹ As noted by Elizabeth Sirriyeh, dreaming shapes 'the foundation of Islam' and Muhammad himself is described as 'a perfect dreamer, visionary and interpreter of dreams'.⁶²

The traditions pointed out above emphasize that dreams represent a lower level of prophecy, and so could be considered instances of revelation. In this sense, Gustave von Grunebaum describes dreams in Islamic tradition as a 'private prophecy' and a 'personal message'.⁶³ The traditions also emphasize that, after the death of the Prophet, messages of divine origin can still be communicated to believers through dreams. According to a widely quoted Hadith, Muhammad is reported to have said that 'whoever has seen me in a dream has seen me in truth, for Satan cannot imitate me in a dream'.⁶⁴ In his *Ma'ānī al-Qur'an*, interpreting the Q 10.63, Abū Zakariyā Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) states that, while paradise is the reward of believers in the afterlife, true dreams are a reward bestowed on believers in the world.⁶⁵

The special value of dreams in Islam is well documented by contemporary scholars. Mohammad Mahallati and Sholeh Quinn explain the role of dreams in the myths of origin of medieval Muslim dynasties.⁶⁶ Yehoshua Frankel provides the characteristics of the dream accounts recorded by the chroniclers of the Mamluk period in Egypt.⁶⁷ As documented by other scholars, the vast corpus of mystical literature and Sufi biographies are replete with dream-related narratives.⁶⁸ Dreams also received special attention in medieval Islamic theological and philosophical works. As an example, in his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, al-Ghazālī spoke of true dreams of the faithful, which originate from God and the divine.⁶⁹ In a section in his *Munqidh* entitled 'The True Nature of Prophecy', al-Ghazālī appeals to dreams as evidence of the possibility of the supernatural transmission of knowledge and communication between God and humans. Here, he uses the example of dreams as a 'stepping-stone to higher truth', and ultimately as the best proof of prophecy, since a vision that occurs in sleep may represent a glimpse into the realm of the unseen.⁷⁰

In the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition, dreams were described as phenomena in which the activity of the Imaginative Faculty (*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*) increases because of the absence of sense-perception, which in turn gives access to the truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), enabling people with 'pure' and well-prepared souls to see into the future.⁷¹

⁵⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Vol. 9, Book 87, no. 119.

⁶⁰ Ibid., no. 116.

⁶¹ See Donaldson, *Shī'ite Religion*, 129–41.

⁶² Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions*, xi.

⁶³ Von Grunebaum, 'Introduction', 13.

⁶⁴ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Vol. 1, Book 3, no. 110. In the Shī'a tradition, visions of key figures such as 'Alī and other Imams are considered to comprise true dreams. See Sindawi, 'Image of Alī b. Abi Talib', 187.

⁶⁵ Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'an*, 471.

⁶⁶ Mahallati, 'Significance of Dreams', 156; Quinn, 'Dreams of Shaykh Safi al-Din'.

⁶⁷ Frankel, 'Dream Accounts'.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Corbin, 'Dream'; Trimmingham, *Sufi Orders*, 54; Katz, *Dreams*, 205–30; Ormsby, 'Poor Man's Prophecy', 142–3.

⁶⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Fear and Hope*, 73.

⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, 96–7.

⁷¹ Al-Kindi was one of the first Muslim philosophers to have emphasized this theme. See al-Kindi, 'Risāla', 294–5.

Although al-Ghazālī and philosophers such as al-Fārābī appeal to dreams to prove the possibility of human–divine communications, for the former, ‘God communicates directly through sleep and dream, and the visionary, prophetic state is posited “beyond reason”, while al-Fārābī is more concerned with exalting the rational faculty to the extent that it subsumes all other human faculties.⁷² Al-Ghazālī himself likened the interpretation of the Qur’an to the interpretation of dreams. ‘The interpretation of the Qur’an (*ta’wīl*)’, according to al-Ghazālī, ‘occupies the place of the interpretation of dreams’ (*ta’bīr*) and the exegete’s task is to ‘comprehend the hidden connection between the visible world and the invisible’ or unseen in the same way that the interpreter of dreams seeks to make sense of another person’s dream.⁷³

Al-Fārābī emphasizes the importance of dreams in his account of revelation and prophecy, but argues that true visions may occur not only when one is sleeping but also when one is awake. For him, ‘true visions will arise from the particulars which the Active Intellect gives to the faculty of representation in dreams’. Al-Fārābī emphasizes that all ‘these events occur in sleep as well as in waking life, but their occurrence in waking life is rare and restricted to a very few people’.⁷⁴ These people are prophets in whom the Imaginative Faculty, which ‘acts as a reservoir of sensible impressions after the disappearance of the objects of sensation’ and ‘combines sensible impressions to form a complex sensible image’ is developed to its perfection.⁷⁵ ‘The man [viz. the prophet] who has that sight comes to enjoy overwhelming and wonderful pleasure, and he sees wonderful things which can in no way whatever be found in other existents’.⁷⁶

Soroush’s approach to dreaming and his likening of it to revelation thus have roots in Islamic sources, although he does not make many references to the rich literature relating to dreams in Islam, since his main point of departure is the Qur’an. He occasionally refers to Hadiths indicating that the beginning of God’s inspiration to Muhammad was in the form of ‘true’ dreams,⁷⁷ and cites a Hadith from Imam ‘Alī which reads ‘the dream of prophets is *wahy*’.⁷⁸ He also refers to al-Ghazālī twice⁷⁹ and alludes to the medieval Muslim mystic Ibn ‘Arabī to validate his theory. Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought is relevant here as he occasionally discusses the interpretation of dreams in his *Bezels of Wisdom*. Referring to the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his son, Ismā‘īl, Ibn ‘Arabī criticizes Abraham for not interpreting his dream appropriately:

The state of sleep is the plane of the Imagination and Abraham did not interpret [what he saw], for it was a ram that appeared in the form of Abraham’s son in the dream, while Abraham believed what he saw [at face value].⁸⁰

It is important to note that this situation is the inverse of what we expect when thinking about Abraham’s dream. In the dream of Abraham, as explained by Ibn ‘Arabī, it was not the ram that represented the son but rather the son that represented the ram. The main

⁷²Ormsby, ‘Poor Man’s Prophecy’, 149.

⁷³Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Qur’an*, 53.

⁷⁴Mahdi, *Al-Farabi*, 134.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Al-Fārābī, *On the Perfect State*, 225.

⁷⁷Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 245.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 244.

⁸⁰Ibn ‘Arabī, *Bezels of Wisdom*, 99.

point here is that dreams should be ‘interpreted’ and ‘codified’, meaning that what appears in a dream does not necessarily correspond to its literal equivalent in real life – the same point that Soroush emphasizes in his theory of Prophetic Dreams.

What should finally be taken into consideration is that, despite some similarities between Soroush’s theory of Prophetic Dreams and other theories of revelation, as demonstrated above, it can be stated that Soroush’s theory represents a break with the dominant theory of revelation in Islam. This difference holds not only in the sense that medieval Muslim scholars, in general, tended to argue against the idea that the Qur’an included Muhammad’s words, but also in the sense that revelation tends to have been considered an auditory event, meaning that the Prophet heard voices in the process of revelation rather than visualizing scenes. William Graham has argued that the ‘traditional Muslim theory has tended to be that Muhammad received all the Qur’an orally from Gabriel as explicit verbal revelation given when the latter appeared to him’.⁸¹ Similarly, Daniel Madigan notes that the traditional account of revelation ‘has almost univocally described the phenomenon [of revelation] as auditory’.⁸² When it comes to dreams, many medieval Muslim scholars stressed the primacy of auditory dreams over visual experiences. According to Hagar Kahana-Smilansky, ‘the prestigious status of spoken and verbal messages in dreams was commonly accepted in medieval Islam’.⁸³ Not only scholars such as Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), but also philosophers such as Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī considered visible imagery inferior to the verbal messages communicated in dreams. The latter in particular considered knowledge received through auditory means ‘more noble and exalted than visual experience’.⁸⁴ In contrast to most medieval scholars, Soroush considers the process of revelation as taking place in the form of dreams, and in a significant part in visual form. Indeed, Soroush uses the term ‘dream’ to emphasize the visual aspect of revelation.

The relationship between Prophetic Dreams and earlier theories

The seed of the theory of Prophetic Dreams was sown before Soroush began to develop this theory in the 2010s, and can be traced back to the time when he was working on the Expansion of Prophetic Experience. In an interview in 2008, Soroush stated: ‘Revelation and dreams are made of the same fabric. If you want to understand what revelation is, you should turn to its friend and companion, i.e. dreams, and cross-examine it’.⁸⁵ He added: ‘It seems to me very natural that the Prophet of Islam had dreams – or something like dreams – whereby the tales of prophets were recounted to him’.⁸⁶ In addition, in his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Soroush stated that the Prophet’s ‘experience’ of the divine did not simply consist of hearing physical and audible words, as traditionally understood, but rather included ‘reveries, insights and illuminations’.⁸⁷ That is, the idea that Muhammad experienced revelation in the sense that *wahy* contained visual aspects – in the form of visions and images – was alluded to

⁸¹Graham, *Divine Word*, 26.

⁸²Madigan, *Qur’an’s Self-Image*, 141.

⁸³Kahana-Smilansky, ‘Self-Reflection’, 116.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵Soroush, ‘Islam, Revelation and Prophethood’.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 19.

earlier. However, in discussing this theory, Soroush did not adequately explain the qur'anic images of paradise and hell, or the Day of Resurrection as presented in the Qur'an. Rather, he dealt with these issues in his theory of Prophetic Dreams, explaining how the qur'anic images of resurrection, heaven and hell are related to the Prophet's visions and experience.

There are, however, a number of similarities between the theory of Prophetic Dreams and that of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience. In discussing his theory of Prophetic Dreams, Soroush states that 'Gabriel was the Prophet's power of intellect which appeared to him in his revelatory dreams in the form of an angel'.⁸⁸ According to him, we should not interpret the term *rūḥ al-amīn* in the Qur'an as referring to a mediatory figure who transmitted God's message to the Prophet. The Qur'an does not refer to two different persons – Muhammad and Gabriel – but rather to one person who is speaking to himself.⁸⁹ Soroush had already emphasized this same idea in his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience. There, Soroush stated that the angelic figure was a product of Muhammad's intellectual faculty: 'the angel's arrival, the delivery of revelation and the like are events that occur within the Prophet's being'.⁹⁰ That is, in the phenomenon of revelation, 'the Prophet's higher self speaks to his lower self'.⁹¹ In both theories, therefore, Gabriel is explained to be not a mediatory figure existing external to the Prophet, but rather an imaginary one who appeared in the Prophet's psyche.

One issue that needs to be clarified is the position of Soroush's contextualist approach to revelation and the Qur'an in his theory of Prophetic Dreams. In the theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, the socio-legal precepts of the Qur'an (*aḥkām*) are referred to as accidental, contingent and mutable, having been shaped in the particular culture in which the Qur'an emerged. These precepts form accidental aspects of religion since they are historically and culturally specific and thus are not absolute and universal, unlike the essentials of religion, which are universally applicable.⁹² In the theory of Prophetic Dreams, Soroush seems still to be faithful to this theory, adding that dreams themselves are culturally bounded and take shape within a particular context and worldview: 'If an Arab views, for example, the sun in his dream, it is different from a Chinese person who views the sun in a dream'.⁹³ As the sun, stars and moon do not carry the same meaning or connotation in all cultures, their meanings are rather intimately bound to the culture in which they are discussed. This means that we should ask ourselves what it would have meant for someone like the Prophet, living in seventh-century Arabian society and in the Hijazi culture, to view the sun, stars and moon in his dreams.⁹⁴ According to Soroush, when the Qur'an states that, on the Day of Judgement, people will neglect their camels (Q 81.4), this dream of the Prophet took shape in a context in which camels were valuable for Arabs; and thus for people to neglect their camels – their prize assets – symbolizes the enormity and the horror people will experience on the Day of Resurrection.⁹⁵ Therefore, the Prophet did not have his religious experiences

⁸⁸Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 119.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 120.

⁹⁰Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 332.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 293.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 63–91.

⁹³Soroush, 'Ta'bīr-e ma'ād'.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

and dreams in a vacuum; rather, they were intimately related to, and shaped by, his immediate context, i.e. his surrounding environment and his relation with his community. Accordingly, Soroush states:

If the Prophet lived in another environment, the metaphors [he used in the Qur'an] would have changed and would have taken another cultural hue (*rang-e farhangī*), meaning that his dreams would have changed and other forms of illustration (*taṣvīr-garī*) would have appeared in his dreams.⁹⁶

In sum, for Soroush, 'The Prophet's revelation is inevitably contaminated with Arabness. ... This means that the culture of Arabian [society] was [inevitably] incorporated into his revelation; the Arabic language of the time reflected the Arabian culture'.⁹⁷ Soroush's idea that the Prophet's mission and revelatory experiences would have been different had they taken shape in another context or country had already been emphasized in the theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience: 'Had Islam come into existence in Greece or India, instead of in Hijaz, the accidentals of a Greek or Indian Islam – accidentals which penetrate so deep as to touch the kernel – would have been very different from those of an Arab Islam'.⁹⁸

Unlike in his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Soroush does not explore *āyāt al-aḥkām* in close detail in his theory of Prophetic Dreams. One question which might arise is: Did the Prophet visualize these verses in his dreams, or did they have an auditory nature? Soroush replies,

The Prophet of Islam visualized *ṭahāra* (purity), which is the prelude to prayer, in the form of washing the hands and face in a prophetic dream, and commanded Muslims [to do this]. This is the same in the case of the prohibition of wine-consumption, eating pork, etc.⁹⁹

According to Soroush, after going over the rules for ablution in Q 5.6, the Qur'an states, 'God does not wish to place any burden on you: He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you'. This means that purification and spirituality are the ultimate goals of religious precepts and rituals: '*Aḥkām* are garments in dream form that are being clothed to spiritual realities'.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, in this new theory, Soroush still emphasizes that socio-legal passages in the Qur'an are secondary to the essential aspects of the religion.

It should be noted that Soroush has not explained in detail how his theory of Prophetic Dreams justifies the *āyāt al-aḥkām*, and his remarks about the socio-legal passages in the Qur'an in his book are limited to those mentioned above. More importantly, his ideas about such passages seem to be developed on an *ad hoc* basis. Since all the *āyāt al-aḥkām* of the Qur'an, such as family laws and laws of inheritance and marriage, are not visual, graphic and illustrative in nature, at least to the same degree as the verses related to the afterlife and resurrection, the question that arises is: Why should a believer not simply be faithful to traditional accounts of revelation, accepting that the Prophet received the socio-legal precepts of the Qur'an in an auditory manner, without any significant visual revelation? Soroush's approach to the *āyāt al-aḥkām*, which seeks to

⁹⁶Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 220.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 250–1.

⁹⁸Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 77.

⁹⁹Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 179.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 180.

incorporate them into his theory of Prophetic Dreams, can also be challenged from another perspective. Soroush states that the language of the Qur'an is either entirely the language of dreams or wholly a waking language, and there is no middle ground between them, nor can it be a combination of both.¹⁰¹ The main question that arises in criticism of this statement is: Why can we not believe that the Qur'anic language is composed of both waking and dreaming elements? Indeed, it can be argued that Muhammad at some points received revelations in visual form and at others he only heard voices in his prophetic revelation – examples of the latter being *āyāt al-aḥkām*. In addition, Soroush's idea that Muhammad dreamt *āyāt al-aḥkām* can be challenged on the grounds of his taking an ahistorical approach to the socio-legal precepts of the Qur'an. Many *āyāt al-aḥkām*, including punishment rulings, had their roots in pre-Islamic Arabian society, meaning that the Qur'an did not establish them and that they were incorporated into the Qur'an based on the dominant culture of Arabian society at the time. This means that the existence of such verses in the Qur'an can be justified without necessarily adhering to the theory of Prophetic Dreams.

In both the theory of Prophetic Dreams and the theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, the Prophet's personality is said to play a key role in revelation, and the Prophet's likes and dislikes have an impact on revelation. In both theories, the Prophet is at the centre of revelation and the main 'creator' of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, therefore, contains Muhammad's words, not directly the Word of God. The idea that God does not speak at all had already been emphasized in Soroush's earlier theory: 'The attribution of speech to God ... is to be taken metaphorically'.¹⁰² Thus, the Prophet is considered in both theories not to be a mere mouthpiece and passive agent in the process of revelation. According to Soroush's theory of Prophetic Dreams, 'The Prophet is at the centre of the religion, and the religion has taken shape around the personality and experiences of the Prophet'.¹⁰³ This idea is similar to that emphasized in the theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, namely, that religion is centred on the personality of the Prophet: 'The Prophet's personality is the core; it is everything that God has granted to the Muslim community. Religion is woven through and through with this personality'.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, in both theories, God's role is restricted to His inspiring Muhammad.¹⁰⁵ For Soroush, it was Muhammad who underwent a spiritual experience in which he was overwhelmed by the presence of God, but the creation of the Qur'an was Muhammad's task.

One might ask what relation exists between the theory of Prophetic Dreams and the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge. As discussed above and noted by Soroush himself, one fundamental element of the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge is that, 'in order to understand religious text, we need some pre-understandings and these pre-understandings have different stages and kinds; some are excellent which we cannot ignore ... and some which could be

¹⁰¹Ibid., 109.

¹⁰²Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 329.

¹⁰³Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 226.

¹⁰⁴Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 16.

¹⁰⁵Soroush explains that his theory of revelation does not seek to explain how Muhammad was inspired by God, nor does it seek to explore the metaphysical nature of revelation or even its validity. This means that his main concern is to take a phenomenological approach to revelation, rather than an ontological approach (Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 104).

ignored or purified'.¹⁰⁶ In the theory of Prophetic Dreams, Soroush argues that, in order to interpret the Qur'an, we need to assume that the language in which it is written is the language of dreams. This is compatible with the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge in the sense that no reading of the Qur'an is devoid of certain assumptions.¹⁰⁷ Soroush writes:

Even if one rejects the theory of Prophetic Dreams, he still has pre-assumptions. His pre-assumption might be that the language of the Qur'an is the language of waking life, and that the Qur'an is the Word of God. This influences his approaches to interpreting the Qur'an. Whatever the case, either I or my opponents have a pre-assumption, and ... either position is compatible with the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge.¹⁰⁸

In the theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge, Soroush argues that a person who believes that religious language is symbolic interprets the text in a different way from one who believes that religious language is factual.¹⁰⁹ The choice of one or the other approach to religious language directly affects how a scholar views the meaning of the Qur'an. Along similar lines, in his theory of Prophetic Dreams, Soroush states that no interpretation of the Qur'an is possible without a specific understanding of revelation. The difference between the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge and that of Prophetic Dreams, however, is that in the former Soroush regards the Qur'an as God's Word, while in the latter the Qur'an is Muhammad's word. Indeed, in the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge, Soroush never suggested that Qur'an is or includes the Prophet's words. Rather, he stated, 'What God has stated, [and] what is in the Qur'an ... are unchanging ... and no one has the right to add or deduct anything from them'.¹¹⁰ Although Soroush made this statement in the context of discussing religious knowledge, his main idea was that the Qur'an is the direct Word of God, as he himself stated later.¹¹¹

According to Soroush, there is no inconsistency between the theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge and the theory of Prophetic Dreams in the sense that both imply that the Qur'an could be interpreted differently in different times and places, and so there are multiple possible interpretations of the text.¹¹² For Soroush, 'At that time when I wrote the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge, I said waking-language (*zabān-e bīdārī*) has many interpretations; now I say dream-language (*zabān-e khāb*) has many interpretations'.¹¹³ However, it should be noted that Soroush had already stated that if we seek to interpret terms used in the Qur'an (such as 'tree', 'sun', 'moon', etc.), we need to understand how these terms were understood when the Qur'an was revealed. Does this not mean then that we should understand

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 282. Soroush uses this approach to argue that the fatwas of *fuqahā'* represent certain pre-understandings rooted in the desires and life experiences of the person who pronounces the fatwa: 'The fatwa of an Arab takes on the hue of Arab culture, and the fatwa of a Persian takes on the hue of Persian culture. The fatwa of a village dweller takes on the hue and odour of a village, and the fatwa of a town inhabitant takes on the taste of his town' (Soroush, *Qabd va baṣṭ-e te'orik-e shari'at*, 244).

¹⁰⁷Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 283.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Soroush, *Qabd va baṣṭ-e te'orik-e shari'at*, 164–70.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 503.

¹¹¹Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 283.

¹¹²Ibid., 368–70.

¹¹³Ibid., 370.

the Qur'an according to the worldview of the Prophet's audience? This issue will be explored later.

Some implications of the theory of Prophetic Dreams

Soroush's theory of Prophetic Dreams has a number of implications that align with his larger project of reforming Islamic thought in the modern period. The first implication is that qur'anic stories should not be thought of as referring to actual historical events. Rather than employing a methodology that deals with the stories of the Qur'an as if they were historical events, interpreters should treat them as the Prophet's dreams. In this way, Soroush seeks to steer readers of the Qur'an away from treating the text as a merely historical pamphlet that narrates events that have actually taken place at a certain point in history.¹¹⁴ He rejects any methodological approach that seeks to prove whether or not the qur'anic stories contradict history – a methodology that has had some proponents amongst twentieth-century orientalists.¹¹⁵ This approach also echoes the ideas of scholars such as the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Khalafallah, who distinguished between 'historical authenticity and the artistic nature of some of the events mentioned in the Qur'an'.¹¹⁶ Khalafallah argued that qur'anic narratives should not be approached as historical reports of events that took place at particular places and times. In response to orientalists' approaches to qur'anic stories, he argued that 'the intent of the Qur'an in the narratives was nothing but admonition (*'ibra*) and exhortation (*'iza*) and never was instruction in history or explication of its truth'.¹¹⁷ Soroush himself stated that his theory resembles that of Khalafallah when it comes to qur'anic stories:

My idea is similar to that of those such as Khalafallah who believed that qur'anic stories were not historical reality and should be approached as myth. This is what I confirm, i.e. that these historical narratives were not realities that took place at a certain point of history. I would say instead that 'these are dreams'.¹¹⁸

Accordingly, the narrative of Adam took shape in the Prophet's dreams; it was not a historical event that occurred at a certain point in human history, and therefore certain classical questions such as 'How many thousand years ago did Adam appear on the earth?', or 'What happened to the descendants of Adam?', or 'Is the narrative of Adam compatible with Darwinism or not?' – questions that have posed by some scholars and interpreters – are all invalid.¹¹⁹

Similarly, the scientific knowledge or cosmological terms that appear in the Qur'an and that sometimes seem to be inconsistent with modern scientific knowledge do not really represent concrete cosmological realities, but rather those parts of Muhammad's dreams that reflected his worldview and understanding of the world in which he lived.¹²⁰ This approach had already been emphasized in Soroush's theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, where it was pointed out that the 'entry of the scientific

¹¹⁴Ibid., 300–1.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 241–2.

¹¹⁶See Salama, *The Qur'an*, 53.

¹¹⁷Haddad, *Contemporary Islam*, 47.

¹¹⁸Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 300.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 242–3.

¹²⁰Ibid., 241.

theories of the age (medicine, astronomy, etc.) into scripture and religious tradition' was an accidental aspect of the Qur'an and religion.¹²¹ There, Soroush stated that the Prophet's scientific knowledge was no more than that of the people around him. The Prophet did not speak the 'language of his time while knowing better himself. He actually believed the things he said. It was his own language and his own knowledge'.¹²² Therefore, in both the theory of Prophetic Dreams and the theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, any scientific knowledge mentioned in the Qur'an does not necessarily reflect scientific 'truth', but rather demonstrates Muhammad's worldview and what appeared to him in the process of revelation.

Another implication of Soroush's theory of Prophetic Dreams is related to the notion of the resurrection of the body. As is well known, this issue has raised the most acute questions among Muslim philosophers. Some have not accepted that resurrection should be understood literally, while others have attempted to justify the notion through philosophical explanations. For Ibn Sinā, for instance, resurrection 'is received from scripture (*shar'*) and can only be demonstrated by recourse to the holy law (*sharī'a*) and assent to prophetic reports', and thus no philosophical explanation or justification for it can be presented.¹²³ Soroush claims that there is no need to justify the resurrection of the body through philosophical explanation, but the theory of Prophetic Dreams can explain it very well. Verses such as 'From the earth We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time' (Q 20.55) should not necessarily be interpreted as describing a literal bodily resurrection, Soroush argues. It was in the Prophet's dreams that people were seen rising from graves, and this is not necessarily something that will take place in reality.¹²⁴ For Soroush:

The Qur'an does not tell us more than that the Prophet has seen the dead arising from the earth (*khāk*) in his prophetic dreams; but seeing a body in a dream is not necessarily the same as seeing a body in a waking state, so the account of resurrection [pointed out in the Qur'an] should not be taken literally and needs to be (re)interpreted.¹²⁵

In his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Soroush maintained that prophetic religious experience is open to all the Prophet's followers, who can in turn further expand and perpetuate it. In this way, religion can be enriched and continually perfected, and even exceed the initial horizon of the Prophet's experience. Islam, therefore, embraces not only the Prophet's experiences but also that of all the thinkers, Sufis and scholars who followed Muhammad: 'Islam is not a book or an aggregate of words; it is a historical movement and the history-incarnate of a mission. It is the historical extension of a gradually-realized prophetic experience'.¹²⁶ This is compatible with another idea that Soroush develops in the same theory, namely, that the meaning of a text can exceed the original intentions of an author: 'A text can have meanings independent of the author's intention'.¹²⁷ The theory of Prophetic Dreams also accords with this idea, holding that a dream can always be interpreted in ways that escape the initial

¹²¹Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 78.

¹²²Soroush, 'Word of Muhammad'.

¹²³Ibn Sinā, *Kitāb al-najāt*, 326.

¹²⁴Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 243.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 216.

¹²⁶Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 16.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 177.

understanding of the dreamer. As Soroush stated in a lecture, an unavoidable characteristic of dreams is that the dreamer often cannot fully comprehend their meaning – indeed our dreams can often be better decoded by others.¹²⁸ Therefore, the interpretation of prophetic dreams, as recorded in the Qur'an, is an endless task, and an ongoing project whose various aspects can be unpacked by others in the course of history. In this lecture, Soroush states that 'the Prophet himself was not entirely aware of what he has brought to humanity'.¹²⁹ This means that the Prophet's experiences and dreams can be expanded, developed and enriched by people who live generations after him. It is the interpreter's assumptions, questions and knowledge, all of which come from sources outside of religion, that determine the meaning and understanding of prophetic dreams. This is how Soroush's new theory, like his two earlier theories, explains that the meaning of the Qur'an is not necessarily limited to the meaning discerned by the early commentators or by Muslims of previous generations.

The final implication of Soroush's theory, which has an important bearing on Islamic theological discourse, is that Muhammad's capacity to comprehend and describe God was subject to his own cognitive limitations. This in turn means that what the Qur'an explains about God is only one approach to understanding God. In other words, there is an important distinction between God *per se* and God as described in the Qur'an. God can by no means be explained in concrete terms even in a holy scripture such as the Qur'an. He cannot be limited by words or attributes ascribed to Him. Yaser Mirdamadi compares this approach with that of negative theology (apophaticism), which maintains that, since God is beyond the reach of human knowledge, no human language, theory or concept can be used to describe God. This means that 'all attributes of God should be read negatively' rather than describing Him 'literally and in a positive manner'.¹³⁰ Soroush's theory is in line with this approach in the sense that even the Qur'an is unable to describe God. Whatever descriptions of God are found in the Qur'an originated in the Prophet's revelatory dreams and reflect his own limited worldview. That is, any approach to understanding God – even that of the Prophet Muhammad – has its own limitations. Therefore, in contrast to his theory of the Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge, in which Soroush only distinguished between the Qur'an itself and its various interpretations, in this theory, Soroush distinguishes between God and what the Qur'an says about God, holding that the former is beyond human reach – including the reach of Muhammad – while the latter only includes Muhammad's understanding of God.¹³¹

Conclusion

This article has explored the development of Abdolkarim Soroush's theories concerning revelation and the Qur'an. It has argued that, in his theory of the Contraction and

¹²⁸Soroush, 'Ru'yāhā-ye rasūlāneh'.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Mirdamadi, 'Soroush's Theory', 162.

¹³¹Having said this, as a theist philosopher and a devout Muslim, Soroush believes that, although God is beyond human understanding, He is not separable from natural phenomena, meaning that the creation of heaven and earth, the alternation of night and day, sending down rain from the heavens, and the direction of the winds and the clouds all represent God's actions in the world (Soroush, *Kalām-e Muhammad*, 110). This means that Soroush himself praises Muhammad's experience of God, according to which all phenomena in the world are attributed to God.

Expansion of Religious Knowledge, emphasis is placed on the relation between sacred scripture and religious knowledge, while in his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience, emphasis is placed on the relation between the Qur'an, Muhammad and God, and Muhammad's role in the process of revelation and the creation of the Qur'an. Accordingly, while the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge historicized religious knowledge, but continued to view the Qur'an in an ahistorical manner,¹³² the Expansion of Prophetic Experience historicized the very nature of the Qur'an.

Soroush's theory of Prophetic Dreams represents a continuation of his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience in the sense that the Prophet's personality plays a key role in revelation, such that the Qur'an is said to be the word of Muhammad, rather than God's literal word. Unlike his previous theories, in which Soroush did not explore the qur'anic images of paradise and hell, or the image of God as presented in the Qur'an, the theory of Prophetic Dreams deals with these issues in greater detail. In contrast, while his theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience focused on the contingency of *āyāt al-aḥkām* and their secondary importance to the essence of religion, the theory of Prophetic Dreams does not deal in great detail with the verses of the Qur'an related to socio-legal matters. Soroush's argument about the visual/pictorial nature of these verses is not yet convincing and, as stated, is subject to a number of criticisms. Another issue that still requires further clarification concerns Soroush's approach to interpreting the Qur'an. Although he states that qur'anic terms and expressions should not be taken literally and require decoding since they are written in a 'dream-language', Soroush has not yet introduced any methodology that explains how this decoding should be undertaken.

Finally, despite the significant socio-political implications of his two earlier theories, as I have demonstrated elsewhere,¹³³ the theory of Prophetic Dreams has mainly theological consequences not only for questions of exegesis, but also for questions such as those related to God's attributes and the resurrection. Last but not least, Soroush's idea about this last issue remains controversial since it casts doubt on the 'literal' understanding of resurrection which, from the perspective of believers, is an essential feature of the religion.

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¹³²As explained, Soroush historicizes religious knowledge in the sense that he argues that all areas of religious knowledge are comprised of human knowledge, and refuses to attribute any divine characteristics to them. For Soroush, 'religious knowledge is human knowledge in the sense that it has been subjected to human norms', such as human desires, pre-understandings and prejudices (Soroush, *Qabd va bast-e te'orik-e shari'at*, 106).

¹³³Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives*, 61–96.

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