

The Biblical Sublime:
An Autobiographical Journey into the Use of the Terror Sublime

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INTRODUCTION

Through reading Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three* I became aware of, and began to look for, sublime experiences in literature. In reading an article by Stephen Cresap on the "aesthetics of terror,"¹ I became aware of the terror sublime and began to look for it in literature. The Bible, composed of two entities: The Hebrew Scriptures² and the Christian New Testament, not only seemed to deliver sublime experiences for me, but many of the terror variety as well.

In this paper I embark upon an examination of the sublime, particularly the terror sublime in the Bible. Of key interest will be the comparison and contrast of the terror sublime in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament to ascertain if God and/or His actions are portrayed differently to accomplish different objectives. However, I contend that God and His sublime activities are of the same essence in both testaments. In addition, I intend to demonstrate that God, as He is presented in the Bible, is the ultimate sublime entity. Furthermore, I will experientially investigate the biblical sublime, putting myself in the role of subject, and show that God is portrayed in such a way as to take advantage of the characteristics of the terror sublime so that the readers will fear, worship, and obey Him.

It should be noted, however, that the terror sublime is not the only variety one finds in the biblical corpus. In fact, one might argue that the most sublime event of all the biblical literature is the crucifixion of Jesus,³ which is portrayed as the death of innocence, love, and divinity. In Psalm 139:14 we can see the sublime experience of an overwhelmed King David where he was

¹ Stephen Cresap, "Sublime Politics: On the Uses of an Aesthetics of Terror," *CLIO* 19:2 (1990): 111-125.

² Obviously, adherents to Christianity refer to this text as the "Old Testament," but that term tends to alienate adherents to Judaism. Therefore, for our purposes, the term Hebrew Scriptures is preferred.

³ For a great discussion of the sublimity of this event (including the subject's thoughts and emotions regarding such) and the cross that depicts it (with the historical developments noted), see Tsang Lap-Chuen, *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 85-88.

“fearfully and wonderfully made.” David was overwhelmed by a superior power.⁴ In addition, other aspects of God’s activity have been described as sublime (e.g., God’s infinite “I am,” creative “Let there be light,” and the authoritative law-giving in the “Thou shalt” and “Thou Shalt Not”).⁵ Immanuel Kant himself admits that, “Perhaps there is no sublimer passage in the Jewish Law than the command, Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything which is in heaven or in the earth or under the earth, etc.”⁶ Commenting on Kant’s perspective, Lap-Chuen writes, “The sublime that concerns him, as a philosopher of the eighteenth-century Europe steeped in the Christian tradition, is associated with God, the world and the self or human soul, which he construes as transcending the natural order. According to him, the sublime instantiates itself, to mention the exemplary, in natural objects of magnitude and might.”⁷ Accordingly, Kant asserts the sublime is an object of fear and love, and the most sublime object is God.

In this essay, I will first attempt to describe the sublime, particularly relying on the thoughts of Kant and Edmund Burke. I make a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful in the process, which will necessitate discussion of the nature of the sublime in general and that of the terror sublime in particular. Following that discussion, I will apply the concepts of the terror sublime to the biblical literature, first to the Hebrew Scriptures and then to the Christian

⁴ For elaboration see Vanessa Ryan, “The Physiological Sublime: Burke’s Critique of Reason.” Journal of the History of Ideas 62.2 (April 2001), 272-273.

⁵ Andrzej Warminski, “Returns of the Sublime: Positing and Performative in Kant, Fichte, and Schiller” MLN 116.5 (December 2001), 969.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. H. Bernard. (London: MacMillan, 1892; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), §29.

⁷ Tsang Lap-Chuen, *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory*. (Rochester, NY University of Rochester, 1998), 137.

New Testament. The journey concludes with some comments attempting to synthesize and summarize that which is discovered via the sublime experience.

THE SUBLIME

Nature of the Sublime

The word “sublime” comes from the Latin “sublimis” and means “up to the threshold.” One might contend that a sublime experience is one that takes the self up to the threshold of what he/she is able to understand, comprehend, or take in. To introduce properly the concept of the sublime, one is obliged to consult Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In it, Kant labels as sublime that which is “absolutely great” or “what is great beyond all comparison.”⁸ Similarly, Edmund Burke notes that the sublime is “the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling.”⁹

There is a paradoxical nature to the sublime in that it is a pain that gives pleasure. Kant notes that when an object is perceived as sublime there is pleasure, but it is a pleasure only possible through the medium of pain.¹⁰ The pain, which precedes the pleasure, comes from a confusing sense of formlessness. The pleasure comes by pleasurable relief in returning to ourselves and the thought of our own moral nature.

Kant divides the sublime experience into the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. The mathematical sublime is concerned with quantity or proportion. In particular, something is so expansive that the view cannot take it in; it exceeds our capacity for

⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §25.

⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). ed. T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 39 (I.vii).

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §27.

understanding. In short, “the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small.”¹¹ Among other examples, Kant gives the example of a star-filled sky.

The process of experiencing the mathematical sublime could be described in the following first-person narrative with regard to that star-filled sky. First, I am confronted with the night’s sky, abounding in luminaries. I am overwhelmed as I turn my head in all directions to take it all in. In so doing, I am humbled, impressed, and confused by its immenseness. Next, I try to comprehend this incomprehensible view by labeling the distance as akin to infinity, and I am comforted, for a moment. Next, I realize that the object is too vast to be adequately understood. I see that my label is inadequate and that my human understanding cannot account for what I am experiencing. Finally, I come to the realization that it is my capacity to reason which is driving my desire to grasp that which is beyond grasping with an inadequate concept. Ultimately, I have failed in my efforts to comprehend the object, but in the process I have become aware of a mysterious, inborn capacity for me *to attempt* to match my imagination to the object. This coincides with Kant’s description of the sublime as “that, the mere ability to think which, shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense.”¹²

The dynamic sublime occurs when an experience is overwhelmingly powerful, like a stormy sea. Burke wrote, “I know of nothing which is sublime which is not connected to the sense of power.”¹³ In experiencing the dynamic sublime, we recognize our helplessness. For example, dramatic acts of nature humble and diminish us, making us aware of our weakness in comparison. For Kant, something must excite fear in us if it is going to be regarded as

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §25.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970’s* (Cambridge, 1990), 30.

dynamically sublime. However, Kant notes that we can regard an object as fearful, without being afraid of it. Interestingly enough, he gives the example of the virtuous man who “fears God without being afraid of Him,” instead such fear moves him to offer no resistance to God or his commandments.¹⁴

Subject vs. Object

In case the matter is not perfectly clear, we have to clarify that sublimity does not lie in the object, but the subject. For example, when it is nature that induces the sublime experience, Kant explains that “nature excites the Ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided size and might are perceived.”¹⁵ As well, he notes that, “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging Subject, and not in the object of nature that occasions this attitude by the estimate formed of it.”¹⁶ Again, the power of the sublime is not in the object, but in the subject (i.e., in us, in our minds). Kant elaborates, “All we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind.”¹⁷ “The feeling of sublimity is not the result of a possible or actual act of will. It merely reveals the subjective conditions of such an act.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, §26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §28.

¹⁸ Patricia Matthews, “Kant’s Sublime: A Form of Pure Aesthetic Reflective Judgment,” Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism 54.2 (Spring 1996), 177.

Beautiful vs. Sublime

In the aesthetics of Kant, one has to make a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful possesses *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*, purposiveness without purpose. The sublime, by contrast, according to Kant, is a principle of disorder, of purposivelessness.¹⁹ Contrary to the beautiful, sublimity does not reside in the natural object.²⁰ Kant explains, “We must seek a ground external to ourselves for the Beautiful of nature; but seek it for the Sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature.”²¹ In addition, the effect of the experience of the two is different. “The sublime moves, the beautiful charms.”²² As well, the beautiful turns us outward, but the sublime turns us inward. Lastly, the characteristic quality of the beautiful is order, while that of the sublime is an overwhelming sense of disorder, or even chaos. In other words, where there is beauty, there is organization; where there is the sublime, there is disorganization.

Terror Sublime

Terror, it seems, is a key component of the sublime. Burke and Kant explain the impact of the sublime in terms of the subject’s primary motivation, that being self-preservation. Of course, this can also be manifested as fear.²³ Burke goes on to note that, “Terror is in all cases

¹⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, tr. T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, 1981), §26.

²³ Kate Nesbitt, “The Sublime and Modern Architecture: Unmasking (an Aesthetic of) Abstraction.” *New Literary History* 26.1 (Winter 1995), 101.

whatsoever either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.”²⁴ Another scholar notes that, “Sublime things are terrifying, and terrifying things are sublime.”²⁵ Burke describes his sublime as “a curious mingling of pain and pleasure provoked by terror and awe in the face of overwhelming greatness.”²⁶

SUBLIME EXPERIENCED IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

It is this terror sublime to which we now turn our attention, particularly as it relates to the biblical material. One is reminded of a general theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, that being the ‘fear of the Lord.’ In fact, the fear of the Lord is often given as a label for those who believe in and are followers of God.²⁷ For example, we note that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”²⁸ in Proverbs 9:10. Those who are wise are the ones who have encountered the Sublime One and reacted appropriately. Similarly, Cresap notes that, “The exemplary reaction to the sublime is being paralyzed by fear.”²⁹ I will examine some biblical instances that contribute to the sublime experience of a reader in general, or to this author as a reader in particular.

²⁴ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 58 (II.ii).

²⁵ Cresap, “Sublime Politics,” 117.

²⁶ Nesbitt, “The Sublime and Modern Architecture,” 101.

²⁷ The covenantal name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is יהוה, or “Yahweh.” However, in keeping with the Jewish tradition whereby the sacred name was not vocalized for fear of taking it in vain, I will use the terms “Lord” and “God.” (*cf.* Most Bible translations typically substitute “LORD” for the proper name.)

²⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

²⁹ Cresap, “Sublime Politics,” 117.

There are many instances of the biblical text where one can experience the sublime. In the interests of brevity, we will only be able to examine a few on our journey. However, I will endeavor to list others that could certainly be expounded upon in addition to the fuller expositions that follow. For example, in Genesis 19 Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back on her home in Sodom, an act of disobedience prior to God's destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah by fire and brimstone in that same chapter, indeed the terror sublime being demonstrated in the destruction of two cities. There is also the experience of Moses in front of the burning bush. He knew he was in presence of the divine, even removing his sandals because he was on ground made holy by God's presence (Exodus 3). In Leviticus 10, the sons of Aaron the High Priest are consumed with fire from heaven when they offer up a sacrifice in an unwarranted fashion.³⁰

In Numbers 16 we see God demonstrating the "new way" He invented to eliminate rebellious people, for here the ground opens up and consumes the rebels, taking them alive down to the grave. In 2 Samuel 6 the Israelites are bringing the Ark of the Covenant back from its captivity at the hands of the Philistines. During the festivities of transporting the Ark, it is about to fall when the ox that was pulling it on a cart stumbles. Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the Ark and is struck dead on the spot. In the book of Jonah, the prophet of the same name is swallowed by a giant fish for fleeing from his obligation to God. After fearing for his life and pledging obedience, he is spat back on the dry ground after a few nights to think it over. Lastly, we see the Day of the Lord (i.e., Day of Judgment) spoken of and pictured in sublime fashion.

³⁰ In response to seeing his nephews consume by fire, Moses mentions to his brother Aaron that, "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.' (Leviticus 10:3). In response, Aaron remained silent in response to his sublime experience.

This will be seen again in the New Testament, but here we note texts of God destroying masses and bringing vengeance.³¹

The Flood

One thinks of the mathematical sublime with regard to the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9, due to the immense concept of a world wide flood. But there is also the terror sublime, for in the flood we see great devastation. We are told that the water was so expansive that even the tallest mountains were covered by as much as twenty feet of water (Gen 7:19-20). The carnage was immense, for we read that “Every living thing that moved on the earth perished--birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died” (Gen 7:21-22). The biblical record seems to anticipate the reader’s response of questioning the goodness of God and fearing that He might wipe him/her out as well. Therefore, we read of a promise made by God to not destroy the earth with a flood again, even assuaging their fears with a sign of that promise, namely the rainbow in the sky after the rain (Gen 9:11-16).

As one reads the flood narrative, one is overwhelmed by the concept of both the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. The mathematical sublime is seen in the vast quantities of water required to flood a whole planet, especially to the point of having many feet of water exceed the mountaintops. I am reminded of the sublimity of seeing my own family having to undergo the flood of the Mississippi River in 1993. The quantity of water was incomprehensible. How much greater the image of the Genesis flood is impressed upon my

³¹ E.g., Isaiah 66:15-16 notes, “See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the LORD.”

mind. Contemplating the numerous people trying to climb to high ground or tread water to fight against the rain and its effects, especially for a people who had never experienced rain before, is mind-boggling as one experiences the dynamic sublime. To think of Noah and his family safe in the ark and having to watch friends and neighbors drowning in a mass watery grave, provokes the emotions of fear and awe, in light of a God with that kind of potential for vengeance. The reaction of Noah is clear. The first thing he did after setting foot on dry ground was to ascribe to God his worth in worship by building an altar and offering sacrifices (Genesis 8:20).

Parting of the Red Sea

In Exodus 14 Moses led the nation of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. However, Pharaoh's army gave chase. As an escape, God ensured that the Israelites could follow Moses through a parted Red Sea on dry ground. The pursuers followed and the Israelites witnessed Egypt's army destroyed as the walls of water came crashing in on them. Not only is one impressed with the parting of a sea to save a people, but one is even more overwhelmed to see the mass destruction inflicted in the same sort of exercise of power, thus showing God's ability to save or destroy. The fear came upon the Israelites as well, for "when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (Exodus 14:31).

Elijah vs. the Prophets of Baal

One of the great displays of God's sublime activity and the ensuing result is found in 1 Kings 18 with the showdown between God's prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal, a rival deity. The contest was to see which deity would bring down fire from heaven to consume the

sacrifice laid on their respective altars. The masses were convinced when no heed was paid to Baal's prophets and their requests, and the opposite was seen from Elijah's God. Elijah's God rained down fire that consumed the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones, all of which had been saturated with water first. Upon seeing this awesome display of the dynamic sublime, the spectators fell prostrate to worship and exclaimed, "The LORD--he is God! The LORD--he is God!" (1 Kings 18:39).

SUBLIME EXPERIENCED IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

There is a pervasive notion, even among adherents to Christianity, that there are either two deities in the Bible or at least a preferred one. The perception is that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, is a God of justice and wrath who is angry and sometimes seen as capricious. In contrast, the God of the Christian Scriptures, or New Testament, is seen as a deity of love, grace, and mercy. This has caused some to declare they are two different deities and others to declare that God matured or at least got the anger out of his system.

One might expect to see the absence of the terror sublime in the Christian Scriptures. However, as our journey will show, nothing could be further from the truth. For example, in Acts 5 Ananias & Sapphira are struck dead by God for lying about the amount of money they were contributing to God's work. Also, in Acts 12 when receiving adulation due only deity, Herod is struck dead for not giving glory to God instead. Not only are there instances of the terror sublime, but one might even make a case that some are of a greater intensity than found in the Hebrew Scriptures. As we shall see, there are clearly instances where the New Testament writers either record events apparently designed to develop fear which leads to obedience or they

intentionally write of God in such a way to produce that same fear. For example, in Hebrews 10:31 we note that, “It is a dreadful³² thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Jesus’ Warning to Fear God

Jesus seeks to instill the fear of God into the hearts of his listeners. In fact, he makes it clear that they should not fear other humans, but God, the creator, and destroyer, of those humans. For example, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus exclaims, “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (Luke 12:4-5). Obviously, the intention is for the reader to “fear” God, for we note the imperative of the word “to fear” (φοβέω) four times over the two verses and three in verse 5 where the command is to fear God. Again, we see the common biblical thread of the “fear of the Lord,” which should be an identifying mark of God’s people. That is, they fear God, having experienced the sublime in him. This fear is what is “the beginning of wisdom” and the motivation for obedience and worship.

“Hell”

Perhaps the most intense sublimity in the Bible, especially of the terror variety, is experienced in the concept of hell. At times a translation fails to capture the essence of the original languages. The use of the word “hell” is one of those. For, while we see the English word “hell” in the Hebrew Scriptures, it has a different meaning and connotation than in the

³² The Greek adjective is φοβερός, which has the same root from which we get the English word “phobia,” and might just as well be translated as “fearful” (King James Version) or “terrifying” (New American Standard Bible).

Christian New Testament. Of course, the reality is that the English word “hell” is used to translate different words, one Hebrew word in the Old Testament and two Greek words in the New Testament.

More contemporary translations have made attempts to show these distinctions, but they are particularly blurred in the King James Version of the Bible (KJV). For example, the KJV uses the English word “hell” to translate the Hebrew word “Sheol” (שְׁאוֹל) and the Greek words “Gehenna” (γέεννα) and “Hades” (ᾗδης). More recent translations make a distinction between the three, labeling only “Gehenna” as “hell” in either testament.³³ For our purposes, we will concern our discussion with Gehenna only, for Gehenna carries those sublime connotations that move a hearer (or reader) to think differently, particularly about eternity and God.

Interestingly enough, Jesus is the one who gives us the bulk of our information about hell. In Mark 9 he notes that it is a place where the fires of torment “never go out.” The consuming “worm does not die” and “the fire is not quenched.” It is pictured as a place of eternal suffering where it would be better, Jesus notes in that same chapter, to go to heaven “maimed than with two hands to go into hell.” People should fear God and his hell so much so that they would cut off the hand that was causing them to sin. In Revelation hell is described as a lake of fire for the punishment of the wicked, described in Matthew 25 as a place of “eternal fire” (25:41) and “eternal punishment” (25:46). Indeed, hell is the motivating factor used to move people to “flee the wrath to come” by trusting and obeying God.

³³ For example, the New American Standard Bible version (NASB) will typically transliterate and use the Anglicized terms “Sheol” and “Hades” while the New International Version (NIV) will typically translate and interpret the words (i.e., “the realm of death below” for שְׁאוֹל and “the depths” or “the grave” for ᾗδης respectively – although the NIV does transliterate “Hades” in Matt 16:18 and translates “hell” for ᾗδης in Luke 16:23 and in the book of the Revelation.

The Return of the King

Lastly, we will look at the return of Christ as depicted in Revelation 19. This is a continuation of the concept of the dreaded “Day of the Lord” and fulfillment of all of the carnage described in the Hebrew Scriptures regarding that Day of Judgment. We see the Christ returning as a conquering king, wearing a crown and upon a white horse. He slays his enemies and pours out his wrath. In fact, we note that, “He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty” and that he is wearing a “robe dipped in blood.” The imagery here is striking. I am reminded of the “I Love Lucy” episode where Lucy and Ethel are barefoot and stomping grapes in the wine press to make wine. They have to hold up the hems of their dresses to avoid splattering them with the juice of the grapes. The parallel is seen here, but they are not grapes that are smashed, but people; not grape juice on the garment, but blood. This, of course, reinforces the notion prevalent in the New Testament that Jesus is coming again and the imperative is to be ready. This fearfully sublime experience reminds one of the immediacy and weight of that admonition.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the journey ends, one reflects on Karl Marx who described religion as an opiate of the masses which duped them into living without questioning their lot in life, lulling them into passivity. In contrast, Burke spoke of religion as terror.³⁴ Similarly, an examination of the biblical sublime seems to point to a text that motivates readers or hearers to think, feel, and act a certain way. Their sublime experiences are to make them active in fearing God and consequently obey him. After this journey, it is my contention that the writers of biblical

³⁴ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 67-70 (II.v).

literature did not merely want to record the sublime experiences of individuals that we might see how they responded. On the contrary it seems to me that authorial intent was that subsequent readers would encounter sublime experiences and *they* would thereby be inclined to fear, worship, and obey the God of the Bible as well.

In Ecclesiastes 12:13 Solomon writes: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” It would seem that after examining the biblical sublime, there is a cause and effect relationship between the two-fold “whole duty of man” described by Solomon. He who also wrote that the “fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” exhorts the reader to fear God, which is the cause that will create the effect of keeping his commandments.

According to Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*,³⁵ God is an object of the *mysterium*, the *fascinans* and the *tremendum*. A comparable object is the monster in the film *Dracula*, an object which arrests our attention (*mysterium*): we want both to look (*fascinans*) and to look away (*tremendum*), peeking through our fingers. Indeed, the God who is holy seems to be the ultimate sublime figure. John Calvin explains: “Hence that dread and wonder with which as Scripture commonly represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God. ... man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”³⁶ God is the Overwhelming One who is experienced in such a way that there is a pleasure that follows from the pain. The sublime in the Bible is moving. Feeling that pain and pleasure I too was so moved on this journey.

³⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*; tr. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923, 1950, 1958).

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; 2 vols. tr. Ford Lewis Battles (1559; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.1.3.

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