

A Symbolic Profile of the Bahá'í Faith*

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Abstract

Advanced study of the Bahá'í Faith must still deal with basics. While considerable progress has been made in historical research on Bábí and Bahá'í origins, much foundational work in Bahá'í Studies remains to be done at the level of text. Based on primary sources, this study will present a “symbolic profile” of Bahá'í consciousness, to the extent that it is shaped by the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and ancillary texts. To order and classify the symbols, this profile will employ Ninian Smart's dimensional model of religion, using the present writer's acronym, DREEMS (Doctrinal, Ritual, Ethical, Experiential, Mythic, Social). Sherry Ortner's key symbols paradigm, consisting of thought-orientating “root metaphors” and action-inciting “key scenarios,” completes the profile, while John Wansbrough provides insight into the formation of a new religious ethos through a process of symbolic transformation. This study will highlight some of the predominant Bahá'í symbols, to which others will surely be added.

Bahá'í Symbol Theory

What makes a religion distinctive? Islam affords an analogy. In *The Sectarian Milieu*, John Wansbrough discusses the emergence and formation of the early Muslim community. Islam arose from within a preexisting “sectarian milieu”—a welter of “hardly distinguishable confessional groups” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* 98). Contemporary historical sources disclose “the fact of Arab hegemony in the Fertile Crescent but virtually nothing of the confessional community called Islam” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 118). What, then, led to the emergence of “Islam” as a distinct ethos, beyond the Arab ethnos? It was not the Arab conquests in which the self-definition of Islam inhered: “The elaboration of Islam was not contemporary with, but posterior to the Arab occupation of the Fertile Crescent and beyond” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 99). Islam, as a religion, was not coeval with conquest. The political force of the early Arab expansion of the first two Islamic centuries did little to advance the ethos of the religion itself. A religious ethos requires interpretation and development.

Imagery reifies the abstract. The ethos of Islam was shaped, in part, by a constellation of powerful, thought-orienting symbols. Fundamental to the documentation of confessional identity,” Wansbrough asserts, “was selection of appropriate insignia from the monotheist compendium of symbols, topoi, and theologoumena” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 99). When these took shape and crystallized into their final form, they became “schemata of revelation” which “eventually generated a kind of subsidiary imagery,” fixed within an “initial range of symbols” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 100). Rather than the military and political fact of conquest by Arabs who professed Islam, it was “the collection of confessional insignia which,” according to Wansbrough, “eventually crystallized as ‘Islam’” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 128). “Similarly,” Wansbrough continues, “the ecclesiological imagery of Aphrahat and Ephrem exhibits the successful, if occasionally strained, adaptation of a quite extraordinary range of motifs whose original symbolic value for the authority of the Church was anything but obvious” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 102–3). Whether in Islam or in early Syriac Christianity, symbols serve to orient the thoughts of the believer, inspiring and modeling strategies for action. An emergent symbol canon plays an emblematic role in communal self-definition.

Symbols migrate. They can be taken up or assimilated from one tradition by another. This phenomenon involves a process of “symbolic transfer” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 102), resulting in a “transmission history of symbols” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 103). “The migration of symbols,” Wansbrough observes, “may be either productive or reductive” but “the crucial process is after all one of assimilation.” “It is hardly surprising,” as Wansbrough points out, “to find that those descriptions of community origins associated with the monotheistic confessions exhibit more similarities than differences” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* ix). While there are certainly formal similarities among the Western religions, this study will argue that the differences are

paradigmatic. While symbols may be quarried from prior traditions and taken up in a new tradition, the symbols are reinterpreted in their new setting. How does this relate to the formation of a distinctive Bahá'í ethos?

The Persian roots of the Bahá'í Faith are well known. Classical Persian poetry—particularly Perso-Islamic mystico-erotic poetry is the source of much of Bahá'u'lláh's imagery. Much of Bahá'í symbolism may in fact be pre-Islamic in origin. Some symbols are ancient and are inherited, like an ancestral gene pool, from one historically contiguous tradition to the next. Symbols of Christian, Jewish, and Mesopotamian origin were doubtless mediated through both Islam and Persian cultural traditions. In the Persian symbolic landscape, it stands to reason that, while prescinding from arguing any direct symbolic genealogy, the pre-Islamic stratum would certainly include elements from the symbolic constellation underlying Persian Christianity.

Originality must still be factored into analysis of these images. “However derivative the components, however disparate their original symbolic values and underlying mythologies,” Wansbrough states, “their retention in a fresh configuration entails a successful semantic shift” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 102). This “fresh configuration” of symbols also involves a successful paradigm shift. The emergence and crystallization of Bahá'í identity derives from its universal impulse, not from its ethnic origins, and resides in its symbolic insignia, its grammar of images—images that are derivative, but reconfigured by a dynamic originality.

Crucial to the crystallization of a distinctive Bahá'í paradigm, and to an elaboration of the Bahá'í ethos, were several factors, not the least of which was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's role in formulating and furthering a core set of Bahá'í “principles” and Shoghi Effendi's privileging of Bahá'í texts that he chose to render into English. While acknowledging these elaborative developments, this study will focus primarily on some of the predominant and formative key symbols in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Such a project may be considered an exercise in what Ninian Smart terms “worldview analysis” (Smart, *Worldviews* 2).

In his analysis of the Bahá'í symbolic vision, Alessandro Bausani writes:

An expression like: ‘the dove of eternity sings on the branches of the Túbá tree’ (the name of a tree symbolic of Muslim paradise) is susceptible of three levels of interpretation: (a) realistic level: in a pretty garden on a verdant tree a dove sings fascinating melodies; (b) mystic-symbolic level: in the Gardens of Paradise, outside of this lowly world, saints and blessed ones sing the praises of God; (c) realistic-symbolic level: Bahá'u'lláh at an exact moment in our time sends forth into the world a renewing spirit that will recreate it and give it form again in unitary visible forms, revealing his Writings in a definite place in the earth (the vicinity of Mt. Carmel). The spatial and temporal concreteness therefore, remains but makes itself translucent with eternity. (Bausani, “Some Aspects of the Bahá'í Expressive Style” 43)

This expression, “translucent with eternity,” is instructive, particularly with respect to the symbol's opacity. A symbol is opaque until it is understood. It need not even be explicable. It is sufficient for it to be intuited. For the one to whom the symbol makes inspirational sense, the symbol is translucent, at once a way of looking at present reality, and at the same time affording a glimpse of the potential future, of a possible collective scenario, of the ideal real, the translucent shadows of the spiritual world to which a Bahá'í is ontologically and morally committed.

These symbols take on a life of their own. In the inner world of spiritual consciousness, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of “subtle mysteries.” These are described as the “fruits of communion” with God in the garden of the heart. “By My life, O friend,” Bahá'u'lláh writes,

wert thou to taste of these fruits, from the green garden of these blossoms which grow in the lands of knowledge, beside the orient lights of the Essence in the mirrors of names and attributes—yearning would seize the reins of patience and reserve from out thy hand, and make thy soul to shake with the flashing light, and draw thee from the earthly homeland to the first, heavenly abode in the Center of Realities, and lift thee to a plane wherein thou wouldst soar in the air even as thou walkest upon the earth, and move over the water as thou rushest on the land. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 3–4)

A series of potent images impels the believer to recreate waking life. Like dream-logic, Bahá'í symbolism is the logic of a vision of the world at peace, given its initial moral and spiritual impetus by Bahá'u'lláh. This poetic vision is a resource. It instills faith. If such faith is creative, it expresses itself in action. In this way, faith shapes social reality.

An exhaustive survey of symbols that occur, for example, in Bahá'u'lláh's correspondence, is not required for determining dominant motifs. A frequency inventory of motifs in Bahá'u'lláh's writings would simply amount to a statistical, academic exercise, with an uncertain validity in the Bahá'í experience of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, given its selective and limited exposure to them. Although the corpus of this Bahá'í scripture is enormous it is estimated

that Bahá'u'lláh “revealed” around 15,000 “Tablets” of which some 7,000 are extant—those texts which exerted the most profound influence on Bahá'í communal consciousness are a relatively small and select number of the best-known and widely circulated works of Bahá'u'lláh. It is methodologically sound, therefore, to restrict data selection to the most renowned and influential writings of this founder.

Bahá'u'lláh's acknowledged masterpieces include, among other works, the following: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (1873), Bahá'u'lláh's weightiest work; *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude* (1861–62), Bahá'u'lláh's foremost doctrinal work; *The Hidden Words* (1858), Bahá'u'lláh's principal ethical work; *The Seven Valleys* (1856), Bahá'u'lláh's greatest mystical work; *The Essence of the Mysteries*, with its “Seven Cities”; *The Four Valleys*, complement of *The Seven Valleys*; The Tablet of Tajalliyát, with its four Effulgences; the Tablet of the World (1891), with its “five fundamental principles for the administration of the affairs of men”; the celebrated Súrih of the Temple (1869), inscribed in the form of a pentacle, with Bahá'u'lláh's epistles to Pope Pius IX (1869), Napoleon III (1869), Czar Alexander II, Queen Victoria (1869) and Násiri'd-Dín Sháh (1868) inscribed within each of the five radial points of the star; the Tablet of Tarázát, with its six “Ornaments”; The Tablet of Ishráqat (1885), with its nine “Splendours”; the Kalimát-i-Firdawsíya (1889), with its eleven “Leaves of Paradise”; the Tablet of Bishárát (1885 or later), with its fifteen “Glad-Tidings”; the Words of Wisdom, with its twenty-two aphorisms; the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (1891), with excerpts from most of these Tablets.

On the basis of these representative texts, it is possible to create a ‘symbolic profile’ of the Bahá'í Faith. Twelve “key symbols” are divided into two classes: “key scenarios” (action-inspiring narratives or mythic/cosmic events) and “root metaphors” (thought-orienting images). Each key symbol has three facets: Personal, Proclamatory, and Global. “Personal” refers to individual spirituality. “Proclamatory” relates to Bahá'u'lláh's eschatological role and authority as “World Reformer.” “Global” emphasizes the actual content of Bahá'u'lláh's world reforms. Thirty-six texts have been selected. Unless otherwise noted, all transliteration supplied in these texts is based on my own reading of the Persian and Arabic originals.

A Symbolic Profile of the Bahá'í Faith as Represented in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Dimension	Key Scenario	Root Metaphors
Doctrinal	<i>The Promised One</i>	<i>Physician</i>
Ritual	<i>The Covenant</i>	<i>Wine/Water of Life</i>
Ethical	<i>Illumination</i>	<i>Mirrors/Gems</i>
Experiential	<i>Lover and Beloved</i>	<i>Journey/Path</i>
Mythic	<i>The Maiden of Heaven</i>	<i>Lote-Tree/Sinai</i>
Social	<i>Crimson Ark/Holy Mariner</i>	<i>Paradise</i>

Key Scenarios

Doctrinal

The Promised One

The symbol of the “Promised One” may be conceived of as a “prophetic/apocalyptic scenario.” Its strategy of action is recognition of Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic credentials, leading to the embrace of faith in his revelatory authority, followed by a transformation in the believer's own life, as he or she seeks to translate belief into action. The prominence of this key symbol is self-evident. For the nonspecialist in Bahá'í Studies, one validating warrant for the privileging of this key symbol might well be the fact of its lexicalization in Wendi Momen's *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, (Focused encyclopedias are useful in sketching consensus.) There, the entry “Promised One, the” is glossed: “The Promised One of the Bayán, ‘Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest’: Bahá'u'lláh. The Promised One of Islam, the Qá'im: the Báb. Generally, the Promised One of all religions: Bahá'u'lláh” (Momen, *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* 188). Although this term is conceptually shared with Bahá'u'lláh's forerunner, the Báb, and, to a lesser extent, with Christ and Muhammad in their respective roles as fulfiller figures, Bahá'u'lláh is the primary referent.

In Bahá'í texts one finds a certain dialectic between theology and history, embodied in the concept of “Progressive Revelation.” Progressive Revelation may be thought of as the theophoric movement in history achieving its most definitive, though not final, expression in the advent of Bahá'u'lláh. Like Einstein's advancement of a theory of relativity in the physical universe, Bahá'u'lláh advanced a theory of religious relativity in the spiritual and moral universe—a theory that explains differences among religions in light of their similarity of purpose. In Christian terms, this is the Bahá'í counterpart to “salvation-history,” the religious “message” of history (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 1). The poetic depiction of this view of history is symbolically concentrated in

the figure of the “Promised One” within the context of Progressive Revelation. Some typical texts in which the Promised One is mentioned are as follows:

Personal: Tablet to Vafá: “Say, God is my witness! The Promised One Himself (lit., *haykal al-maw’úd*) hath come down from heaven, seated upon the crimson cloud (*ghamám al-hamrá’*) with the hosts of revelation (*junúd al-wahy*) on His right, and the angels of inspiration (*malá’ikat al-ilhám*) on His left, and the Decree hath been fulfilled at the behest of God, the Omnipotent, the Almighty. . . . Hearken thou (*isma’*) unto the Words of thy Lord (*kalimát rabbika*) and purify thy heart (*táhir sadraka*) from every illusion (*kull al-ishárát*) so that the effulgent light of the remembrance of thy Lord may shed its radiance upon it, and it may attain the station of certitude (*al-múqinín*).” (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 182–83, *Majmú’i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá ka ba’d az Kitáb-i-Aqdas Názil Shuda* 172)

Analysis: Key to personal salvation is recognition of Bahá’u’lláh as the “Promised One.” The conviction that prophecy-fulfillment has transpired, that the eschaton has been consummated, characterizes what scholars call a “realized eschatology.” Once decoded, the messianic dignity of the “Promised One” plays on traditional millenarian tensions, brought to life historically by the nineteenth-century chiliastic movements of Shaykhism and Babism. If one accepts Bahá’u’lláh’s prophetic credentials as true, it follows that Bahá’í doctrine has the same warrant of authenticity.

Proclamatory: Tablet to Czar Alexander II: “O peoples of the earth! . . . Say: This is an Announcement (*naba’*) whereat the hearts of the Prophets and Messengers (*afidát al-nabíyín wa al-mursalín*) have rejoiced. This is the One Whom the heart of the world (*qalb al-’alam*) remembereth and is promised in the Books of God, the Mighty, the All-Wise. . . . Say: I, verily, have not sought to extol Mine Own Self (*vasf nafsí*), but rather God Himself (*nafs Alláh*) were ye to judge fairly.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh to the Kings and Leaders of the World* 29, *Alwáh-i názila khitáb* . . . 54)

Analysis: The “Promised One” expresses a key scenario of prophecy and fulfillment. The symbol of the Promised One presupposes messianic expectations in the world’s major religions. This is phenomenologically borne out by a comparative study of apocalyptic texts. But the idea that messianic visions are universal and convergent is entirely a Bábí concept modeled on Islamic thought, taken up in Bahá’u’lláh’s proclamations. Thus, Bahá’u’lláh announces himself as the “Promised One” foretold by the prophets of old. According to Wansbrough, this kind of symbolism “reveals a concept of authority based on precedent” (*The Sectarian Milieu* 130).

Global: Tablet to Janáb-i Mírzá Sádiq: “Verily I say, this is the day in which mankind can behold the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised One (*áfáq-i-zuhúr*). The Call of God (*nidá-yi iláhí*) hath been raised, and the light of His countenance (*anvár-i-vajh*) hath been lifted up upon men. . . . Great indeed is this Day! The allusions made to it in all the sacred Scriptures as the Day of God attest its greatness. The soul of every Prophet of God, of every Divine Messenger hath thirsted for this wondrous Day (*yawm-i-badí’*) . . . God grant that the light of unity (*núr-i-ittifáq*) may envelop the whole earth, and that the seal, ‘the Kingdom is God’s,’ may be stamped on the brow of all its peoples.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 10–11 [VII], *Múntakhabátí* 15)

Analysis: This last passage illustrates a problem in translation, where the idea of “the Promised One” is supplied by the context of the text rather than as a technical term. What is rendered “the Promised One” is literally Horizons (plural) of Revelation” (*áfáq-i-zuhúr*; sing. *ufuq*). The precise technical term for “Promised One” in Bahá’í texts is the rather colorless word *mau’úd* (Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* 1346). Recognition of the Promised One is linked with a mission—on the part of both the Promised One and the Promised One’s followers—of unity (*ittifáq*). The term used here may also be rendered “harmony” or “concord” (Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary* 15).

The “Promised One” is a symbol of world-historical proportions. Bahá’u’lláh reveals the will of God for humanity in this age, Bahá’ís believe, and forecasts the future on the basis of his messianic role in shaping it. As Bahá’u’lláh states: “Even as He [Jesus] saith: ‘But ye cannot bear them now.’ That Dawning-Place of Revelation saith that on that Day He Who is the Promised One will reveal the things which are to come. Accordingly in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and in the Tablets to the Kings, and in the Lawh-i-Ra’ís, and in the Lawh-i-Fu’ád, most of the things which have come to pass on this earth have been announced and prophesied by the Most Sublime Pen” (Bahá’u’lláh,

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf 148). When the promises of the Promised One come to pass, they validate that One's prophetic credentials.

Ritual

The Covenant

In the context of Bahá'í Studies, certain problems arise in the use of the term "ritual" as a classification of Bahá'í practices. This problem has been discussed elsewhere (Buck, "Review of *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism* by Denis MacEoin").

The Covenant is a Bahá'í key scenario, the importance of which is empirically indicated by the fact that it is lexicalized and explicated in four distinct entries in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (s.v. "Day of the Covenant"; "Covenant, Greater and Lesser"; "Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh"; "Covenant-breaker," Momen, *Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*). The Covenant obliges Bahá'ís not only to recognize the counsels and laws of Bahá'u'lláh, which are binding on every Bahá'í, but to recognize the authority of the elected, legislative Bahá'í councils as well. One might conceive of the "Covenant" motif as an "authority scenario"—concerned with spiritual authority in general and with successorship in particular. Ortner's requirement that a key scenario function as a "strategy for action" is satisfied here, in that the Covenant is a symbol stressing obedience.

In Weberian terms, the "Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh" accentuates Bahá'u'lláh's charisma, its devolution upon his successors ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi), and its routinization in Bahá'í administrative institutions (the Universal House of Justice, national and local Spiritual Assemblies). In the words of Shoghi Effendi, the Covenant is a divinely ordained "instrument" ordained by Bahá'u'lláh "[t]o direct and canalize these forces let loose by this Heaven-sent process [the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh], and to insure their harmonious and continuous operation after His ascension (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 237). The following passage has to do with what is generally referred to as the "Primordial Covenant" (*mitháq*), referring to a famous verse in the Qur'án in which God asks his creatures, "Am I not your Lord?" (*alastu bi-rabbikum*—Qur'án 7:172):

Personal: Persian Hidden Word #19: "O MY FRIENDS (*ay dústán-i man*)! Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn (*subh-i-sádiq-i rawshání-rá*), when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life (*shajara-yi anísa*), which is planted in the all-glorious paradise (*firdaus-i-a'zam*)? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire (*hargiz ma-khwáhíd*) that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me (*nazd-i-man*) not with lifeless hearts (*dil-há-yi murda*), defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls (*sadr-rá*), ye would at this present hour (*hál án*) recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance (*bayán-i-man*) should be made evident unto all of you" (*Hidden Words* Persian #19; English text: *Hidden Words* 27–28). (Note: In the Persian text, *Hidden Words* Persian #19 is actually numbered #19 and #20. This affects the subsequent numbering, so that the Persian and English numbers are off by one [but occasionally not, which is very confusing]. Thus there are eighty-two Persian *Hidden Words* in English, and eighty-three in Persian. Persian text of *Hidden Words*, Persian #19 [and #20]: *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 32–33.)

Analysis: The Primordial Covenant of preeternity is a paradigm for all time, especially the present. In Islam, the Primordial Covenant (Qur'án 7:172) is, in the words of Annemarie Schimmel, "the metahistorical foundation between God and humankind" (Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* 253). In religious epistemology, the confessional community itself is a cognitive category: the ecclesia (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 130–31). The Primordial Covenant is transferred from preexistence to the present:

Proclamatory: Tablet of Splendours: "Say: 'Yea, by Him that rideth upon the clouds!' Paradise is decked with mystic roses (*jinnat bi-awrád al-ma'ání*), and hell (*al-sa'ír*) hath been made to blaze with the fire of the impious (*nár al-fujjár*). Say: The light hath shone forth from the horizon of Revelation, and the whole earth hath been illumined at the coming of Him Who is the Lord of the Day of the Covenant!" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 119, *Majmú'i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá* 69)

Analysis: "Reference to the past," as Wansbrough notes, "is paradigmatic and retroflexive, again an expression of nostalgia" (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 132). To this Hidden Word (Persian #19) we may usefully apply Wansbrough's description of numen, in which legitimation is subsumed "as the product of a private vision" (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 131). Bahá'u'lláh employs a numinous form of legitimation for ecclesiastical

purposes. “There is no question here of historical location,” Wansbrough comments, “the achievement—in this case the recollection of the primordial event—is personal, timeless in the sense that the precise circumstances of the epiphany do not really matter.” “In this context, the eternity of divine utterance,” Wansbrough adds, “being always and anywhere available, does not conflict with the alleged historicity of its public manifestation” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 131).

In Bahá’í salvation-history, the Covenant of God entails prophetic successorship from age to age, attested by the covert terms of prophecy. It is generally accepted that the individual believer has an obligation to embrace eschatological fulfilment when the advent of a true prophet occurs, constituting a fresh locus of authority.

Global: Book of the Covenant: “O ye that dwell on earth (*ay ahl-i ‘álam*)! The religion of God is for love and unity (*muhabbat va ittihád*); make it not the cause of enmity or dissension. . . . We fain would hope that the people of Bahá may be guided by the blessed words: ‘Say: All things are of God.’ This exalted utterance (*kalima-yi ‘ulyá*) is like unto water for quenching the fire of hate and enmity (*nár-i-daghína va baghdá’*) which smouldereth within the hearts and breasts of men. By this single utterance contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity (*núr-ittihád-i-heqíqí*). . . . That which is conducive to the regeneration of the world (*hayát-i ‘álam*) and the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth (*niját-i-umam*) hath been sent down from the heaven of the utterance of Him Who is the Desire of the world.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 220, 222, 223/*Majmú ‘i-yi matbú’a-yi alváh-i mubáraka-yi hadrat-i Bahá’u’lláh* 400, 403)

Analysis: “Within the monotheist tradition,” Wansbrough writes, “the organizing principle of a confessional community may be located in its definition of authority” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 50). Bahá’u’lláh’s authority may be viewed as the organizing principle of the Bahá’í community. “The concepts of legitimation and redemption, familiar to every student of comparative religion,” he elsewhere states, “are sociologically archetypal and more or less constant in the analysis of monotheist faiths” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 130–31). Wansbrough speaks of Islam, and by extension any of the monotheistic faiths, as “theodicy based upon a public epiphany deposited as the document of revelation” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 130). Under these terms of reference, Bahá’u’lláh is the epiphany, and his writings are the record of revelation. That revelation serves as the founding document, the constitution of the community.

The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh has both external and internal dimensions. The external covenant concerns world unity. The internal covenant is focused on internal unity within the Bahá’í community. The Covenant governs and guarantees the integrity of the community, as it models unity in a grand social experiment. While the Bahá’í Faith has little or no “ritual” in the performative sense of the term, its “ritual” elements are expressed in communal and individual worship. The Covenant, while subscribed to at the level of the individual, functions as the collective agreement to abide by the leadership provided by elected Bahá’í institutions (local Spiritual Assemblies, national Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice). To merit moral authority in the eyes of the world as a model of global unity, the integrity of the Bahá’í community must be maintained, free of schism, while allowing for mature and constructive freedom of expression.

Ethical

Illumination

“Illumination” covers a range of Bahá’í metaphors that are obviously luciferous in nature. This is an ethically charged key scenario. Its strategy for action is to orient the believer in the direction of spiritual enlightenment, resulting in a transformation of thought and action. Various entries in A Bahá’í Dictionary attest to the symbolic importance of illumination. These entries include specific metaphors and names of Tablets that are constructed on models of illumination, to wit: century of light; Day of God; Dayspring of Revelation; Daystar; *Ishráqát*, Splendours; *Tajalliyát*, Effulgences; *Tarázát*, Ornaments; Unity, Seven Candles of. These have one image in common: enlightenment. Three representative texts are as follows:

Personal: Persian Hidden Words #73: “O MY FRIEND (*ay dúst-i man*)! Thou (*tu*) art the day-star (*shams*) of the heavens of My holiness (*samá’-i-quds-i maní khud-rá*), let not the defilement of the world (*kusúf-i-dunyá*) eclipse thy splendor. Rend (*kharq kun*) asunder the veil of heedlessness (*hijáb-i-ghaflat-rá*), that [untranslated text: “free of covering or veil” (*bí-parda va hijáb*)] from behind the clouds (*khalf-i-saháb*) thou mayest emerge resplendent and array all things (*jamí’-i-mujúdat-rá*) with the apparel of life (*bi-khil’at-i-hastí*).” (*Hidden Words* 47, Persian text, *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 62)

Analysis: Radiance, metaphorically, is typically the property of spirituality. But sometimes it can be its opposite, as in some instances of fire imagery. Thus, light imagery has its “dark” side as well. In *Hidden Words* (Persian) #57, Bahá’u’lláh warns that association with the ungodly “turneth the radiance of the heart into infernal fire.” Light is capable of being either eternal or infernal, visible or eclipsed. Either way, the power to influence is potent and potentially omnipresent, like the spiritual sun dawning on the symbolic landscape, constrained mainly by the obstructing resistance of individual willpower. Here, the individual is urged to overcome self and passion, in order to radiate spirituality.

Proclamatory: Tablet to Maqṣúd: “The Great Being saith (*hadrat-i-mawjúdát mí-farmáyad*): The Tongue of Wisdom (*zabán-i-khírad*) proclaimeth: He that hath Me not is bereft of all things. Turn ye away from all that is on earth and seek none else but Me. I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge (*manam áftáb-i-bínish va daryá-yi dánish*). I cheer the faint (*pazhmurdigán-rá*) and revive the dead (*murdigán-rá*). I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way (*manam án rúshanáyí ka ráh-i-dáda binamáyam*). I am the royal falcon on the arm of the Almighty (*manam sháh-báz-i-dast-i bí-nýáz*). I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird (*par-i-bastigán-rá bigusháyam*) and start it on its flight (*va parváz biyámúzam*).” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 169, *Majmú’i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá* 103)

Analysis: Illumination requires a source of illumination. Here, Bahá’u’lláh is represented as an illuminator, not a redeemer. The “Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge” evokes a panoramic image in which the entire landscape is suffused with the power and animus of God, focused through Bahá’u’lláh. By means of this pantheistic symbolism, the revelation of God is represented as the ground of spiritual being. The wisdom/knowledge complex serves as a mental and moral beacon along the spiritual path. In this use of extended, but mixed, metaphors, the bird-souls are animated by the royal falcon, a figure of phoenix-like powers. The grandeur of such a scene serves as a proclamation of the greatness of the Bahá’í revelation.

Global: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* “The utterance of God is a lamp (*mishkát-i bayán*), whose light (*misbáh*) is these words (*ín kalíma*): [‘O peoples of the world! (*ay ahl-i ‘álam*)—missing in translation.] Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch (*hama bár-i yak dáríd va barg-i yak shákhsár*).¹ Deal ye one with another with the utmost love (*bi-kamál-i mahabbat*) and harmony (*ittihád*), with friendliness (*maviddat*) and fellowship (*ittifáq*). He Who is the Day Star of Truth beareth Me witness! So powerful is the light of unity (*núr-i ittifáq*) that it can illuminate the whole earth (*áfáq-rá*) This goal excelleth every other goal (*ín qasd sultán-i maqásíd*), and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations (*ín amal malik-i ámal*).” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 288 [CXXXII], *Múntakhabátí az Áthar-i Hadrat-i Bahá’u’lláh* 184, cf. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 14)

Analysis: Individual enlightenment is internal, but society is external. By his enlightenment, Bahá’u’lláh provides the means for not only individual spiritual advancement but for the progress of society as well. In Bahá’í soteriology, personal salvation is dynamically linked to the needs of humanity. Systematic theologians may refer to this as mutual salvation. Belief in Bahá’u’lláh is a commitment to mutual salvation. As the sun (the Day-Star) is the source of all daylight, the power of unity to illumine the entire world is logically invoked. This image also suggests its opposite: disunity—or darkness—the Bahá’í counterpart of “chaos” in its own Genesis myth of a world socially recreated. Bahá’u’lláh has globalized light imagery to express his gospel of unity. Bahá’í ethics are predicated on unity.

Experiential

Lover and the Beloved

The strategy for action in this key scenario is to deepen the identification of the believer with God, as “revealed” or personified in Bahá’u’lláh. In Bahá’í terms, the “heart” is defined as: “The symbolic centre of an individual’s spirituality” (Momen, *Basic Bahá’í Dictionary*, s.v. “heart”). Similarly, the heart of Bahá’í spirituality is God, who is revealed through Bahá’u’lláh, the perfect mirror of the attributes and will of an otherwise inscrutable Deity. As the symbol of God, Bahá’ís relate to Bahá’u’lláh as the Beloved. A carryover from Islamic mysticism (Sufism), this may be thought of as a “mystical scenario.” Poetically, this relationship is expressed in a variety of motifs:

Personal: [Untitled Tablet]: “Hear Me, ye mortal birds! (*ay bulbulán-i fání*). In the Rose Garden of changeless splendor (*dar gulzár-i báqí*) a flower (*gulí*) hath begun to bloom (*shikufta*), compared to which every other flower is but a thorn (*khár*), and before the brightness of Whose glory the very essence of

beauty (*jawhar-i jamál*) must pale and wither (lit., *bí miqdár*). Arise, therefore (*pas*), and, with the whole enthusiasm of your hearts (*az dil*), with all the eagerness of your souls (*az ján*), the full fervor of your will (*raván*), and the concentrated efforts of your entire being (*az tan*), strive to attain the paradise of His presence (lit., *liqá-yi bí-zavál*), and endeavor to inhale the fragrance of the incorruptible Flower (lit., *gul-i bí mathál*), to breathe the sweet savors of holiness (*ráyiha-yi quds-ruhání*), and to obtain a portion (*hissa*) of this perfume of celestial glory (lit., *nasím-i khwush-i sabá-yi ma'naví*). Whoso followeth this counsel will break his chains asunder, will taste the abandonment of enraptured love (*ín pand band-há bigusilad va silsila-yi junún-i 'ishq-rá bijunbánad*), will attain unto his heart's desire (*dil-há-rá bi-dil-dár rasánad*), and will surrender his soul into the hands of his Beloved (lit., *ján-há-rá bi-jánán sipárad*)." (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 320–21, *Múntakhabát* 206. Daryáy-i-Danish 30)

Analysis: In one of his Words of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh says: "The essence of love is for man to turn his heart to the Beloved One, and sever himself from all else but Him, and desire naught save that which is the desire of his Lord" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 155). Here, "rose and nightingale" imagery, suffused with Sufi symbolism, vivifies and intensifies the experience of believer identification with the Theophany, Bahá'u'lláh, pictured here as a celestial rose. The Lover-Beloved relationship is expressed in the relationship of birds to the exquisite setting of a rose garden, in which a rose of surpassing beauty enthralls the bird-souls. Just as the quest for the Beloved is the paramount goal of Islamic mysticism, so too the mystical scenario in Bahá'í texts is the quest for the Beloved as the revelation ("glory" or "splendor") of God, implicit in the name Bahá'u'lláh.

Proclamatory: [Untitled Tablet]: "Behold how the manifold grace of God, which is being showered from the clouds of Divine glory (*fadl-i subhání az ghamám-i rahmání*), hath, in this day (*dar ín ayyám*), encompassed the world (*ihátik*). For whereas in days past (lit., *agar-cha tá hál*) every lover (*'ashiqán*) besought and searched after his Beloved (*ma'shúq and mahbúb*), it is the Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers (*ma'shúq tálib-i 'ushsháq mí-namáyad*) and is inviting them to attain His presence (*va mahbúb júyá-yi ahabb gashta*). Take heed lest ye forfeit so precious a favor (*ín fadl-rá ghanímat shamríd*); beware lest ye belittle so remarkable a token of His grace (*va ín ní'mat-rá kam nashmuríd*)." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 320/*Múntakhabát* 206, *Daiyáy-i-Danish* 29–30)

Analysis: This is a proclamation that the Beloved has arrived, but with a dramatic twist. A background in the Persian mystical tradition is essential in grasping the full impact of this poignant passage. In traditional Persian poetry, it is always the lover who seeks after the Beloved. In this scene, however, Bahá'u'lláh evokes a sudden reversal of roles: It is now the Beloved who beckons the lover. The "grace" of such a turnaround cannot be lost on the reader: a real, reciprocal relationship between the lover and the Beloved is now possible. This imagery speaks to the rapport between believer and Theophany.

Global: Tablet of Maqsúd: "The Word of God is the king of words (*sultán-i kalimát*) and its pervasive influence is incalculable. It hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being. The Great Being saith: The Word is the master key for the whole world (*miftáh-i a'zam*), inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men (*abváb-i qulúb*), which in reality are the doors of heaven (*abváb-i samá'*), are unlocked (*maftúh*). No sooner had but a glimmer of its effulgent splendour shone forth upon the mirror of love (*mir'át-i hubb*) than the blessed word 'I am the Best-Beloved' was reflected therein. It is an ocean (*bahr*) inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things (lit., *dará va jámi*). Every thing which can be perceived (*har-cha idrák shaved*) is but an emanation therefrom (*zâhir gardad*)." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 173, *Majmú'i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá* 107)

Analysis: In this text, the Beloved is incarnated in scripture. Scripture mirrors the wishes of the Beloved. This mystical scenario helps the believer cultivate more deeply a love of God, personified in Bahá'u'lláh as the "Best-Beloved"—orienting the believer, as a strategy for action, to reliance on the "Word of God" as the "king of words." The universal ramifications of this passage are obvious: Bahá'í scripture is placed on a par with sacred scripture, surpassing even the Bible or the Qur'án in revelatory immediacy. Note how Paradise (the "doors of heaven") is equated with the "doors of men's hearts." The image of the Beloved focalizes and intensifies the experiential dimension of Bahá'í life.

Mythic

The Maiden of Heaven

“Scripture,” as Wansbrough defines it, “is understood to record a single historical act: the transfer by angelic mediation of God’s decree from a celestial to a terrestrial register” (Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* 131). In Bahá’í terms, the “angelic mediation” to which Wansbrough refers is the celestial “Maiden of Heaven” (*húrí*). She is a singular houri, understood by Bahá’ís to symbolize the Holy Spirit and the source of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation. Her symbolic importance is indicated by the lexical entry in *A Basic Bahá’í Dictionary* (s.v. “Maiden of Heaven”). Although the idea of otherworldly, black-eyed damsels is quranic, Bahá’u’lláh’s specific maiden imagery originated with the Báb, who wrote in the “Súrih of the Maiden” (*Súrat al-Húríya*): “O people of the earth! By the righteousness of the One true God, I am the Maid of Heaven (al-húríya) begotten by the Spirit of Bahá (*waladtaní al-bahá*), abiding within the Mansion hewn out of a mass of ruby, tender and vibrant; and in this mighty Paradise naught have I ever witnessed save that which proclaimeth the Remembrance of God by extolling the virtues of this Arabian Youth” (*Qayyúm al-Asmá’* 29, tr. Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 54; cited in Lambden, “The Word *Bahá*: Quintessence of the Greatest Name of God” 34). To the extent that the Maiden of Heaven is symbolic, she is mythic. This does not, however, diminish her reality.

Bahá’u’lláh has described the Maiden of Heaven in a number of works. She appears to function as his alter ego or celestial twin, almost in a Manichaean sense. She also has a corporate (symbolic of faith-community) function in that she is the litmus test of spiritual perspicuity and faithfulness, in her mythic search for the faithful believer. This is what one might consider an emotively intensifying “identification scenario” in which the believer’s faith in Bahá’u’lláh is deepened through contemplation of the Maiden of Heaven’s fidelity to her beloved. This figure will be explicated later, in the concluding section dealing with what is termed “the core Bahá’í myth.”

More traditionally Islamic is the pairing of houris with believers in Paradise. Here, the identification scenario predicates “admittance into Paradise” with fulfilling the will of God:

Personal: Tablet to Vafá (=Wafá—titles of Arabic tablets are Persianized in Bahá’í usage): “As to Paradise (*al-jannat*): It is a reality (*haqq*) and there can be no doubt about it, and now (*al-yawm*) in this world it is realized through love of Me and My good-pleasure (*hubbí wa ridá’í*). Whosoever attaineth unto it God will aid him in his world below, and after death (*ba’d al-mawí*) He will enable him to gain admittance into Paradise (*fí jannat*) whose vastness (*ard*) is as that of heaven and earth. Therein the Maids of glory and holiness (*húríyat al-’izzat wa al-taqdís*) will wait upon him in the daytime and in the night season, while the day-star (*shams*) of the unfading beauty of his Lord will at all times (*fí kull hín*) shed its radiance (*yastadí’*) upon him and he will shine so brightly that no one shall bear to gaze at him.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 189/ *Majmú’i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá* 117–18)

Analysis: Paradise is pictured anthropomorphically on purpose. Maidens of Heaven, as inhabitants of paradise, take on a variety of symbolic functions in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. In a departure from Bahá’u’lláh’s primary use of Maiden symbolism, the Qur’án’s promise of dark-eyed damsels requiting the true believer is preserved in this passage, as a traditional Islamic warrant of the reality of Paradise. Thus, the Maidens retain their eschatological function in tending to the faithful soul in heaven. On one level, this provides assurance of the afterlife—described in ideal but nevertheless earthly terms—creating a romantic expectation, the sensuality of which is decoded at a higher level of discourse. While the maidens are real, they are not literal. They are actually symbolic embodiments of spiritual perfections, which have become the alter egos of faithful believers. Bahá’u’lláh disenchants Paradise of a certain amorous sensuality which too literal a reading of quranic texts entails. The Qur’án’s mystico-erotic descriptions are held to be purely symbolic and nonsensual. This does not disinvest Paradise of its reality, but rarefies the believer’s understanding of it. The Maidens are personifications of the pearls of insight, the intimate companions of the pious soul. Individual enlightenment may be thought of as a lesser form of revelation, viz. inspiration, dependent upon Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation, with which a singular Maiden par excellence is associated.

Proclamatory: Tablet of *Ridván*: “Within this Paradise, and from the heights of its loftiest chambers, the Maids of Heaven (*fí há húríyat min a’lá al-ghurafát*) have cried out and shouted: ‘Rejoice, ye dwellers of the realms above (*ahl al-jinán*), for the fingers of Him Who is the Ancient of Days are ringing, in the name of the All-Glorious, the Most Great Bell (*náqús al-a’zam*), in the midmost heart of the heavens (*qutb al-samá’*). The hands of bounty have borne round the cup of everlasting life (lit., *kawthar* [a river of Paradise] *al-baqá’*). Approach, and quaff your fill.’” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 32/*Múntakhabát* 29)

Analysis: In Bahá’í understanding, the Maiden of Heaven is intimately linked with the agency of revelation. Her

role eludes precise formulation. It is safest to say that the Maiden of Heaven is coincident with the act of revelation. The Maiden's first role is that of annunciator. In this respect, she is the counterpart of the Archangel Gabriel in Islam. The Maiden's first appearance to Bahá'u'lláh was during his imprisonment in the "Black Pit" (*Síyáh-Chál*) in 1852, where, in a vision, she assured Bahá'u'lláh of God's protection and, moreover, of God's revelation to him. In Christian terms, this may be thought of as Annunciation. In this passage, the Annunciation becomes proclamation, a public announcement of Bahá'u'lláh's advent, not by the Maiden, but by the houris of paradise generally. This heavenly acclaim compensates for the relative lack of earthly recognition, as only a small proportion of the world's population professes to be Bahá'í.

Global: [Untitled Tablet]: "Through the might of God and His power (*bi-quva-yi yazdání va qudrat-i ruhání*), and out of the treasury of His knowledge and wisdom (*kanz-i 'ilm va hikmat-i rabbání*), I have brought forth and revealed unto you the pearls that lay concealed in the depths of His everlasting ocean (*la'álí-yi sadaf-i bahr-i samadání*). I have summoned the Maids of Heaven (lit., *húriyát-i-ghuraf-i sitr va hijáb-ra*) to emerge from behind the veil of concealment, and have clothed them with these words of Mine—words of consummate power and wisdom (*dar mazáhir-i ín kalimát-i muhkamát mahshúr nimúdam*). I have, moreover, with the hand of divine power, unsealed the choice wine of My Revelation (lit., *iná'-i musk-i ahadíya-rá*), and have wafted its holy, its hidden, and musk-laden fragrance (*ravá'ih-i quds-i maknúna*) upon all created things. Who else but yourselves is to be blamed if ye choose to remain unendowed with so great an outpouring of God's transcendent and all-encompassing grace, with so bright a revelation of His resplendent mercy?" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 327–28/*Múntakhabát* 210–11)

Analysis: Beyond the Qur'án, in Bahá'í texts, the Maiden imagery focuses attention on Bahá'u'lláh, the earthly locus of Paradise, This Bahá'í "myth" even extends beyond Bahá'u'lláh: the Maiden also has an apocalyptic function, orienting Bahá'ís to the advent of another Manifestation of God a millennium or so in the future, as indicated in Persian Hidden Words #77.

In this passage, the dark-eyed damsels are "clothed" in scripture, the implication being that the reading of scripture actuates an encounter with the maidens who, in mystic transport, unveil to the believer the divine "wisdom and power" that reside in the text. Bahá'í scripture is thus transcendentalized, but universalized at the same time. While paradise is typically thought of in transcendent, "vertical" terms, scripture potentializes paradise in mundane, "horizontal" terms. If its function is to orient humanity to the will of God, then sacred scripture potentially has global, world-historical influence. It is premature to assess the present or eventual impact of the Bahá'í revelation, which is seen as having covert as well as overt influences on globalization.

Social

The Crimson Ark and the Holy Mariner

The Crimson Ark forms part of what one might refer to as a faith-affirming "scenario of assurance and solidarity," which conduces to social cohesion. The "Holy Mariner" is modeled on the patriarch Noah, an archetypal savior figure. While the specific imagery of the Ark traces back to the Báb, I have not yet found a Bábí text in which the Mariner himself actually figures in a key scenario, or dramatic scene. It is indicative of their twinned, symbolic importance that both Crimson Ark and Holy Mariner are found as entries in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (s.v. "Ark, Crimson" and "Holy Mariner, Tablet of the"). The Crimson Ark, much like Noah's Ark, is a symbol of salvation. The ark is a corporate symbol. It suggests that individual salvation cannot be dissociated from the community of the saved. The following texts are representative of such imagery:

Personal: Words of Paradise: "Blessed (*túbá*) is he who preferreth (*akhtára*) his brother before himself. Verily, such a man is reckoned, by virtue of the Will of God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, with the people of Bahá who dwell in the Crimson Ark (*ahl al- Bahá fí al-safínat al-hamrá*)." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 71/ *Majmú'i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá* 39)

Analysis: In this beatitude from the "Tenth Leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise," admittance into the Crimson Ark is conditioned not only on belief but also on altruism. If the purpose of faith is to effect a spiritual transformation of the individual, it follows that belief must be actualized and amplified in moral behavior. In this "scenario of assurance and solidarity," there is, indeed, assurance of salvation, but only if one who professes to be a Bahá'í actually becomes a Bahá'í in character. This is not a matter of faith versus works, as in St. Paul or Luther, because faith and works cannot be opposed in Bahá'í thought. One is the complement of the other. Faith is the catalyst of personal transformation. What is required is not perfection (whether by faith or works), but rather a personal

transformation effected by certitude of faith (belief in Bahá'u'lláh), moral rectitude (in following Bahá'í laws and Covenant), and sanctification (internalized holiness), which may be said to constitute a Bahá'í “order of salvation”—to borrow a Christian concept expressed in systematic theology. When moral behavior is socially referenced, each individual's actions are seen as having communal significance. The ark-dwellers, as the biblical narrative suggests, must live together in harmony. The ark saves not only from without but from within.

Proclamatory: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas (al-Kitáb al-Aqdas):* “How great the blessedness that awaiteth the king who will arise to aid My Cause in My kingdom, who will detach himself from all else but Me! Such a king is numbered with the companions of the Crimson Ark—the Ark which God hath prepared for the people of Bahá. All must glorify his name, must reverence his station, and aid him to unlock the cities with the keys of My Name, the omnipotent Protector of all that inhabit the visible and invisible kingdoms. Such a king is the very eye of mankind, the luminous ornament on the brow of creation, the fountainhead of blessings unto the whole world.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶84, 50)

Analysis: As with the first selection, this second text identifies the inmates of the Crimson Ark as the “people of Bahá”—the Bahá'ís. While Bahá'ís hail from every background, a Bahá'í member of royalty, as a public figure, has a position of considerable importance. The monarch who professes to be a Bahá'í—such as Queen Marie of Rumania, who stated her Bahá'í allegiance publicly in the *Toronto Daily Star* (28 October 1926), and the reigning monarch of Western Samoa, His Highness Malietoa Tanumafili II, whose conversion to the Bahá'í Faith was announced in 1973 has a distinct place of honor within the Ark. In the miasma of social chaos, the enlightened ruler is described as “the very eye of mankind,” a moral beacon. A member of royalty can add greatly to the prestige of the Bahá'í Faith, aiding in its proclamation.

Global: Tablet of Carmel: “Ere long will God sail His Ark (*safínat Alláh*) upon thee, and will manifest the people of Bahá (*ahl al-Bahá'*) who have been mentioned in the Book of Names (*Kitáb al-Asmá' = Qayyúm al-Asmá'*).” (Bahá'u'lláh *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 5/Bahá'u'lláh *Gleanings* 16/*Majmú'i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá*; Lambden “The Word *Bahá'*” 35, n. 33)

Analysis: This final passage is construed as a prophecy foretelling completion of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice on the sacred slopes of Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel (Momen, *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, s.v. “Ark”). Thus, the Ark is launched by the Holy Mariner (Bahá'u'lláh) from Baghdad and comes to rest on Mt. Carmel. Over both land and sea, the Crimson Ark rises above the flood of social chaos. On the sacred mountain, the Ark symbolizes the Bahá'í institutions, especially the Universal House of Justice—the elected, international Bahá'í council that oversees the Bahá'í world. Religion must be institutionalized before it can be truly effective in promoting reform, so long as institutions canalize spiritual energy and activity for the welfare of others. Administering the affairs of the Bahá'í Faith requires proficiency in the art of consultation. Its efficacy is predicated on the integrity of individual members who, collectively, function as institutions. Now that the Universal House of Justice is at the helm of the Bahá'í ship of state, it functions as the proverbial Mariner.

Root Metaphors

Doctrinal

Physician

While key scenarios inspire ideal behavior, root metaphors orient thoughts. Of course, thoughts typically precede action, so the result is much the same. It may be said that root metaphors complement key scenarios.

As salvation systems, world religions have something to offer. Each religion's offer of salvation is referenced to a particular human predicament, whether that be sin, as in the case of Christianity, or suffering, as in the case of Buddhism. A religion cannot dispense salvation unless there is a presenting problem to be overcome. In the Bahá'í worldview, the root of all social evil is disunity, from injustice to war. This is a disease model, certainly. It follows, therefore, that where there is a disease, there ought to be a cure. As the diagnosis and treatment of a disease requires a physician, spiritual disorders require the intervention of a “divine physician”:

Personal: Tablet to Mánakchí Sáhib: “The All-Knowing Physician (*pizishk-i dáná*) hath His finger on the pulse of mankind (*rag-i jahán* [lit., pulse of the world]). He perceiveth the disease (lit., *dard*, pain), and

prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy (*darmán*). Every age (*har rúz-rá*) hath its own problem (*rází* [lit., secret]), and every soul (*har sar-rá*) its particular aspiration (*ávází*). The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in (*imrúz-rá nigarán bāshíd*), and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements. . . . Say (*bigú*): O ye who are as dead (*ay murdigán*)! The hand of Divine bounty proffereth unto you the Water of Life (*áb-i-zindigání*). Hasten and drink your fill. Whoso hath been re-born in this Day, shall never die; whoso remaineth dead, shall never live.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 213/*Múntakhabát* 138–39)

Analysis: While the remedy in this passage is not specified, the authority of the divine physician is stressed. The “All-Knowing Physician” is Bahá’u’lláh. He prescribes the cure for the world’s social ills, but the remedy cannot be forced on people. While it may give the impression of being facile, the cure offered by Bahá’u’lláh, in his capacity as the divine physician, is unity. This unity is really a complex of interlocking interventions, addressing social reforms as well as individual transformation. Still, despite its multifarious applications, the organizing principle, the healing force, is unity. Unity is not a hard pill to swallow, but it does involve a regimen. So long as humanity (the corporate patient) does not place itself under the care of the Physician, it will fail to avail itself of the cure. In the next passage, the socioreligious “cure” is proclaimed, in an open letter to Queen Victoria:

Proclamatory: Tablet to Queen Victoria: “O ye the elected representatives (*asháb al-majlis*) of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind, and bettereth the condition thereof, if ye be of them that scan heedfully. Regard the world as the human body (*ka haykal insán*) which, though at its creation whole and perfect (*sahíh wa kámil*), hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies. . . . That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy (*al-daryáq al-a’zam*) and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union (*ittihád*) of all its peoples in one universal Cause (*amr wáhid*), one common Faith (*sharí’a wáhida*). This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician (*tabíb hádhíq kámil mu’ayid*).” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 254–55/*Múntakhabát* 164)

Analysis: From 1866–70, in open letters to the world’s most powerful rulers and religious leaders of his day, Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed his mission and the essential elements of his teachings. In his epistle to Queen Victoria (c. 1869), a solution to the world’s ills is offered, in the form of a universal value system, a moral code to which all nations and peoples might subscribe. Such a proposal was intrinsically momentous and sudden, ahead of its time. At that time, however, Bahá’u’lláh did not have the status (and thus the perceived authority) to warrant serious consideration of his world reforms by world leaders. Apart from the veracity of the truth-claims it entails, this Hippocratic root metaphor suggests that the entire planet should recognize the prescriptive authority of Bahá’u’lláh as “a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician.” Time will tell whether or not the Bahá’í religion will succeed in its utopian aims to bring about world unity.

Global: Tablet to Fath-i A’zam: “The Prophets of God: should be regarded as physicians (*payámbarán* [sic] *chun pizishkán-and*) whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness (*bi-darmán-i yigánigí*), they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity (*bímárí-yi bigánigí*). . . . The whole of mankind (*mardumán-ra*) is in the grip of manifold ills (*bímárf*). Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine (*darmán*) which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician (*pizishk-i yazdán*) hath prepared. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 80–81/*Múntakhabát* 59)

Analysis: As a faith community, Bahá’ís are known for their ideological commitment to making the earth as one homeland. Whether in the realm of the secular or of the sacred, implementation of Bahá’í ideals is effected through a variety of instrumentalities. However, most of the actual progress towards world unity to date has taken place in the secular sphere. This fact has been acknowledged in certain Bahá’í texts, in which non-Bahá’ís have been recognized for their contributions to the advancement of peace, justice, and world order. Bahá’u’lláh praised Queen Victoria for having abolished slavery in her kingdom, especially at a time when the slave-trade continued to be practiced in the Muslim world. President Woodrow Wilson is another prime example of this kind of recognition. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá once commented that Wilson and his ideals signaled the dawn of the Most Great Peace (Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 85). The cure was already being partially administered by enlightened leaders, as though it were the spirit of the age. This powerful root metaphor inclines Bahá’ís to interpret events that promote global unity, in both secular and sacred spheres, as evidence of a divine Physician at work, behind the scenes.

Ritual

Wine/Water of Life

Sacred beverages, as portrayed in Bahá'í texts, are elixirs of immortality, knowledge, and ecstasy. The Water of Life, for instance, was introduced by the first of three physician texts cited above. Wine is a salient motif. Its relative importance is indicated by its selection as a separate entry in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (s.v. "wine"). A recent journal article on the Bahá'í symbolism of wine underscores its importance (Hatcher, "Unsealing the Choice Wine"; cf. McAuliffe "Wines of Earth and Paradise: Proscriptions and Promises"):

Personal: Persian Hidden Word #62: "O Son of Dust (*ay pisar-i-khák*)! Turn not away thine eyes (*chashm mapúsh*) from the matchless wine of the immortal Beloved (*az khamr bí mithál-i mahbúb-i láyazál*), and open them not (*chashm magushá*) to foul and mortal dregs (*bi-khamr-i kadra-yi fáníya*). Take (*bar gír*) from the hands of the divine Cup-bearer (*az dast-i sáqí-yi ahadíya*) the chalice of immortal life (*ku'ús-i báqíya*), that all wisdom may be thine (*tá húsh shaví*), and that thou mayest hearken (*shinaví*) unto the mystic voice calling from the realm of the invisible (*az surúsh-i ghayb-i ma'naví*). Cry aloud (bigú), ye that are of low aim (*ay past fitrat-an*)! Wherefore (*chirá*) have ye turned away from My holy and immortal wine (*sharáb-i báqí-yi qudsam*) unto evanescent water (*áb-i fání*)?" (English text: Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words 43–44, Persian text, Bahá'u'lláh, *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 56)

Analysis: Wine is most frequently used as a metaphor for God-intoxication induced by the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. As the earthly locus of divinity, Bahá'u'lláh is seen as the powered presence of the sacred, the nimbus of the numinous, the incarnation of divine attributes, as God revealed. This discovery, for those who embrace it, gives cause for celebration. The celestial champagne is metaphorically unsealed upon reunion with the Beloved (recognition of Bahá'u'lláh), but the real reward, in Bahá'í terms, is the satisfaction gained in fidelity to Bahá'u'lláh's laws, to which wine is symbolically compared. In the preamble to the *Most Holy Book*, Bahá'u'lláh characterizes his law-code as "choice Wine":

Proclamatory: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: "By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favour will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation. Think not that We have revealed onto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine (*rahíq makhtúm*) with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight!" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶ 4–5, 21)

Analysis: Wine is a heavenly beverage, symbolic of ecstasy. As a key symbol, it can never be literalized. Bahá'u'lláh has distinguished alcoholic wine from symbolic wine: "We meant by this Wine, the River of God, and His favour, the fountain of His living waters, and the Mystic Wine and its divine grace, even as it was revealed in the Qur'án, if ye are of those who understand" (*Compilation of Compilations* 2:245). The intoxication of the spirit must be earned, while the intoxication of earthly wine is simply a reflex of the nervous system to a low-level poison.

The intoxicant is outlawed, not the intoxication. The believer who abstains from wine is one who is likely to comply with other religious requirements. In the application of the Bahá'í proscription of wine, a principle of gradualism is followed, especially in cultures where wine-drinking is traditionally accepted and is part of the prevalent lifestyle. As a root metaphor, wine speaks to the ritual dimension of the Bahá'í religion (by which its legal dimension is meant), in symbolically expressing obedience to Bahá'í law while literally forbidding, in principle and wherever practicable, the consumption of wine itself.

Bahá'u'lláh invites scrutiny of his laws and precepts, to inspire confidence in their wisdom and potential efficacy. The laws are rooted in principles—principles worthy of recognition, whose merit deserves to be celebrated. Engendering enthusiasm for the Bahá'í agenda, this passage sets a tone for the rest of the *Most Holy Book* and its supplementary texts.

Global: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: "This day, it behoveth whoso hath quaffed the Mystic Wine of Everlasting Life from the Hands of the loving-kindness of the Lord his God, the Merciful, to pulsate even as the throbbing artery in the body of mankind, that through him may be quickened the world and every crumbling bone." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶ 173, 82)

Analysis: While wine is a corporate symbol for Bahá'í laws, these laws are intended for the world to follow.

Observing Bahá'í laws aids in the individual's spiritual progress and transformation, and has an edifying impact on society. That impact may be small, but it is cumulative.

Ethical

Mirror/Gems

Reflective, radiant, and lustrous, mirrors and precious stones and pearls are often clustered together in Bahá'í texts, with more-or-less equivalent symbolism. Mirrors need burnishing, gems require polishing, pearls must be lustrous rather than dull. It is not the fact of being a jewel that counts; rather, it is the quality of refinement that proves the jewel's worth. So it is that refinement of mind and heart is what counts most, yet these are not ends unto themselves. The true test of refinement is the impact of spiritual attainments on society.

Most of Bahá'u'lláh's symbolism is purely Perso-Islamic, but the immediate background of Bahá'í symbolism is Bábí. The Báb made extensive use of mirror imagery, to wit:

The One true God may be compared unto the sun and the believer unto a mirror. No sooner is the mirror placed before the sun than it reflects its light. The unbeliever may be likened unto a stone. . . . Indeed, if God willeth, He is potent to turn the stone into a mirror. . . . Had he wished to become a crystal, God would have made him to assume crystal form." (The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 103)

As the most perfect reflective surface, the mirror of the heart is said to reflect supernal light. But the mirror must first be polished and oriented towards the source of light before it can reflect light. This self-refinement is expressive of ethical intent and assiduous application:

Personal: *The Seven Valleys*: "O My Brother! (*ay barádar-i man*) A pure heart is as a mirror (*qalb-i-latíf bi-manzala-yi á'yína ast*); cleanse it with the burnish of love and severance (*bi-sayqal-i hubb va inqitá'*) from all save God, that the true sun (*áftáb-i-haqíqí*) may shine within it and the eternal morning (*subh-i-azalí*) dawn. . . . Yea, these mentionings that have been made of the grades of knowledge (*ma'rátib-i 'irfán*) relate to the knowledge of the Manifestations of that Sun of Reality (*ma'rifat-i tajallíyát-i án shams-i haqíqat*), which casteth Its light (*núr*) upon the Mirrors (*maráyá*). And the splendor of that light is in the hearts (*tajallí-yi án núr dar qulúb*), yet it is hidden under the veiling of sense (*hujabát-i nafsáníya*) and the conditions of this earth (lit. *va shu'unát-i 'aradíya*—[text misread as *ardíya*]), even as a candle within a lantern of iron (*chun sham' zír-i fánús-i-hadíd*), and only when the lantern is removed (literally, *murtafa'*, "raised") doth the light of the candle shine out. In like manner, when thou strippest the wrappings of illusion (*hujabát-i-afkíya*) from off thine heart, the lights of oneness (*anvár-i ahadíya*) will be made manifest." (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 21, 23–24/*Áthár-i qalam-i a 'lá* 3:113, 116)

Analysis: Mirrors are perfect reflectors only under perfect conditions. Bahá'u'lláh's image of the mirror is that of a brass mirror, not the mercury-coated glass we now think of as mirrors. Mirrors reflect whatever is in front of them, but cannot reflect unless polished. The burnishing of mirrors spoken of in Bahá'í texts assumes an essential orientation of the heart's mirror towards the realm of spirit, so that what is required is not reorienting the mirror so much as refining it.

Proclamatory: *The Book of Certitude*: "The door (*abváb*, lit. "doors") of the knowledge (*'irfán*) of the Ancient of Days (*dhát-i-azal*) being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace, according to His saying: 'His grace hath transcended all things; My grace hath encompassed them all,' hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness (*javáhir-i quds-i-núrání*) to appear out of the realm of the spirit (*'aválim-i-ruh-i-ruhání*), in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence. These sanctified Mirrors (*ín maráyá-yi qudsíya*), these Day-springs of ancient glory are one and all the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe (*shams-i-vujúd*), its Essence and ultimate Purpose (*jawhar-i maqsúd*). . . . These Tabernacles of holiness (*hayákil-i-qudsíya*), these primal Mirrors (*maráyá-yi avalíya-yi azalíya*) which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles (*ghayb al-ghuyúb*). By the revelation of these gems of divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty and grace, are made manifest." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán* 99–100, 103/Persian text Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán* 74–75, 77)

Analysis: Images frequently associated with mirrors in Bahá'í texts are gems and pearls. All three are metaphorically synonymous. In this passage, there is a shift in focus from imperfect to perfect mirrors, from imperfect to perfect gems. The perfect mirrors are the “primal Mirrors”—the Prophets or Manifestations of God—from which all secondary mirrors borrow their light. Unique to the Primal Mirrors is their ability to translate invisible light to visible light. This, of course, is supernal light, defined as the attributes of God. Reflections of godly radiance at the human level are spiritual attributes, nearly all of which have ethical associations. Whatever the symbolism, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamations draw a dynamic connection between the prophets or “Manifestations of God” and the installation or personal discovery of the higher self.

Global: Words of Paradise: “O people of Báb! The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine (*ma'dan-i haqíqí*) there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance (*la'álí-yi hikmat va bayán*) as will promote the well being and harmony (*ásáyish va ittihád*) of all the kindreds of the earth.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 72/*Majnú'i-yi az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá* 40)

Analysis: Development of human potential, if it fails to make the world a better place, is seen as fruitless. In the American Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this has been called “spiritual materialism.” Society without religion is ill equipped to cultivate human virtues and nobility of character. Without the positive influence of religion, society can promote humanism and materialistic idealism, but this is unlikely to produce qualities of compassion and altruism, at least to the degree that religion can in its ideal form. In the Bahá'í worldview, the measure of a person's worth is the degree to which he or she has made a positive contribution to human welfare. The alleviation of suffering, the moral and scientific education of society, and the general betterment of the human condition is integral the Bahá'í theology of mutual salvation. Pearls and gems are typically semi-precious or rare, as are saints, great artists, or renowned scientists. This “Word of Paradise” therefore concerns trades, professions, and scientific research, establishing a linkage between individual and social ethics.

Experiential

The Journey/Path

In her phenomenology of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill (*Mysticism*, ch. 6) speaks of three motifs universally used to narrate mystical experience in forms of allegory. These are the journey, alchemy, and love (cited by Schimmel, *As through a Veil* 64). In Sufi literature, the salience of these motifs cannot fail to impress the reader. The interior “journey” (*safar*) symbolizes the “wandering” (*sulúk*) of the “wayfarer” (*sálik*) on the path to God. “Alchemy” (*al-kímíyá*) is the soul's transformation along the way. Platonically passionate “love” (*'ishq*) leads to union with the Divine. The first and third motifs are easily intertwined in stories of the quest for the Beloved.

At the heart of Persian Sufi poetry is love mysticism. Earthly love, or “metaphorical love” (*'ishq-i-inajází*) is emblematic of heavenly love. The nightingale and the rose—the lover and the beloved—are salient motifs. Allegorically, spiritual love is richly symbolized by the longing of the nightingale (*bulbul*) for the rose (*gul*, cf. Schimmel, “Rose und Nachtigall”). ‘Attár has the nightingale exclaim: “The nightingale has no strength to love the Símurgh— / for the nightingale the love of the rose is enough” (Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* 179). Sufi mysticism was a major stream that fed into Bahá'u'lláh's expressive style and evolving program of reform. According to Amanat, Bahá'u'lláh's “later works composed in the Sufi tradition, . . . reveal a mystical outlook pivotal to his later messianic claims and his sociomoral reforms” (*Resurrection and Renewal* 364). Foremost among the mystical works of Bahá'u'lláh is *The Seven Valleys* (*Haft Vádí*). Unofficially, Bahá'u'lláh's *The Seven Valleys* was the first Bahá'í book ever published, lithographed in India by Jamal Effendi. (Because the work was published anonymously, many thought Jamal Effendi was himself the author.) The revelation of *The Seven Valleys* was occasioned by the questions of Shaykh Muhyi al-Dín, the Qádí of Kháníqayn, a village northeast of Baghdad near the Persian border. Based on ‘Attár's celebrated fable, *Mantiq al-Tayr* (commonly known in English as *The Conference of the Birds*), Bahá'u'lláh draws heavily on the symbolism of the mystical quest. Both Faríd al-Dín ‘Attár (d. 1220) and Bahá'u'lláh employ the symbolizing strategy of allegory to engage others in mystical experience. The *Mantiq al-Tayr* is the journey of thirty birds (*sí murgh*) in quest of the King of Birds, the Símurgh. The title comes from Qur'án 27:16, “O men, we have been taught the speech of birds [*mantiq al-tayr*] . . .” (Rodwell). This legendary Phoenix is said to live on “Mount Qáf” at the end of the world.

A philosophical bird-allegory—the *Risálat al-Tayr* (Treatise of the Bird) by Ibn Síná (d. 1037)—had set a literary precedent over a century prior to ‘Attár. As a philosophical work, the protagonist of this story is the rational soul, on its path to the realm of pure Intellect. Such a conjunction (*ittisál*) with celestial Intelligence was antithetical

to the Sufi quest, however. The tale is about a bird, which, after freeing itself from the nets in which it was ensnared, joins its companions in a journey across eight mountain peaks, in quest of the lofty palace of the King beyond the eighth mountain. It is this allegory in form, though not in content, that set a literary precedent for ‘Attar (Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* 178). (For English translation, see Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna*; cf. Heath, “Disorientation and Reorientation in Ibn Síná’s Epistle of the Bird: A Reading” and “Ibn Síná’s *Journey of the Soul*.” A manuscript of Ibn Síná’s Arabic prose treatise is archived in the Istanbul University Library [A. Y. 1458].)

Other possible sources for ‘Attár’s allegory include an Arabic *Risálat al-Tayr* (Treatise of the Bird) by Muhammad al-Ghazzálí (d. 1111—cited in Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* 178); the Persian *Risálat al-Tayr* (Treatise of the Bird) by Ahmad al-Ghazzálí (d. 1126; cf. Ritter, “‘Attár” 1:753); and a long *qasída*, the *Tasbíh al-Tuyúr* (The Rosary of the Birds) by Saná’í (d. 1131—cited in Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* 178). Saná’í was a master of the *mathnaví*, poetry composed in rhyming hemistiches for epic purposes (Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* 301). The masterwork on ‘Attár is still that of Helmut Ritter, *Des Meer der Seele* (“The Ocean of the Soul”), although the space devoted to *Mantiq al-Tayr* is limited.

‘Attár’s *Mantiq al-Tayr* contains a section narrating the actual journey through seven valleys. This piece is sometimes published independently under the title *Haft Vádí* (Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Symbolism: The Nurbakhsh Encyclopedia of Sufi Terminology* 167–68). Once the allegory is decoded, it is clear that the flight of these birds is modeled on the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad, as ‘Attár (*Mantiq al-Tayr*) himself intimates: “A hundred thousand hearts and souls were destroyed / Until Muhammad one’ night reached ascension to heaven” (Schimmel, *As through a Veil* 65). The prophet’s steed, Buráq (Lightning), is mentioned in ‘Attár’s Seventh Valley: “First put aside the Self, and then prepare / To mount Boraq and journey through the air” (‘Attár, *The Conference of the Birds* 205/ *Mantiq al-Tayr* 257). As Peter Awn observes: “The internal structure of the work resembles an ascending spiral staircase” (“Sufism” 14:114). Carl Ernst has already treated the symbolism of soul-birds (“The Symbolism of Birds and Flight in the Writings of Rúzbiyán Baqlí” 353–66). The *Símurgh* is a symbol of the Godhead.

Gaining insight into the structure of early Bahá’í thought is possible by studying Bahá’u’lláh in light of ‘Attár. Except for the inversion of the fourth and fifth valleys, the sequence of the valleys is identical. The Sufi al-Sulamí (d. 1021 C.E.) once wrote: “Sufism has a starting point, an end, and stages in between” (Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* 85, n. 56). The term *maqám* (stages or station) is quranic, in the verse which reads: “None of us but hath a certain station (*maqám*)” (Qur’án 37:164, Nicholson, *The Kashf al-Mahjúb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism* 370–71).

“Stations” are attainments. They mark progress in the path of discipline. “States” are gifts of grace, flashes of experience, in *The Gulistán*, the Persian poet Sa’dí has Jacob, biblical father of Joseph, say: “My state [*hál*] is that of leaping lightning” (lit., worldly lightning [*barq-i jahán*]—Sa’dí, *The Gulistán or Rose Garden*; cited in Nasr, “The Spiritual States in Sufism” 75, Persian text, n. 15). Bahá’u’lláh speaks of a condition in which one’s soul is made “to shake with the flashing light . . .” (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 4). Rúmi has expressed the distinction between the two: “The *hál* state is like the unveiling of the beauteous bride, / While the *maqám* [station] is the [king’s] being alone with the bride” (*Mathnaví* 1:1435, Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 99). Progress in reaching any or all of the “stations” was considered cumulative and thus permanent. “States,” however, were experienced as states of grace—transitory, like “flashes of lightning,” according to al-Junayd (Nicholson, *The Kashf al-Mahjúb* [8]). One might say that, on the Sufi “path” (*tariqa*), there was an interplay between what in Christian terms might be referred to as works and grace.

In one of the first classic Sufi manuals—*Kitáb al-Luma’ ft al-Tasawwuf* (Book of the Flashes on Sufism)—Abú Nasr al-Sarráj (d. 988) enumerates seven stages along the mystical path (1914, 42–54; cited in Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabí’s Garden among the Flames: The Heart Receptive of Every Form” 103): [1] repentance (*tawba*), [2] abstinence (*wara’*), [3] renunciation (*zuhd*), [4] poverty (*faqr*; cf. Qur’án 35:16), [5] patience (*sabr*, cf. Qur’án 2:103), [6] trust in God (*tawakkul*), and [7] acceptance (*ridá*). These are followed by ten “states” (*ahwál*) of the soul: watchfulness (*muráqaba*), nearness (*qurb*), love (*mahabba*), fear (*khawf*), hope (*rajá’*), longing (*shawq*), intimacy (*uns*), tranquillity (*itmi’nán*), contemplation (*musháhada*), and finally, certainty (*yaqín*); cf. Qur’án 102 and 56:95), which is both the beginning and end of all of the “states.” Sarráj later adds two other states: intoxication and evanescence (Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* 55). Sarráj’s “stations” reflect a Qur’án-based, moral psychology characteristic of Sufism’s ascetic origins. Subtely (“The Cult of ‘Abdulláh Ansári under the Timurids”) mentions Ansári’s *Manázil al-sá’irín* (Stages of the Mystics), the most famous Hanbalite treatise on Sufism. ‘Attár’s sequence represents a love-centered paradigm. This shift probably occurred due to the influence of the woman mystic Rabi’a al-Adawíya (d. 801), who established the primacy of altruistic Love (*mahabba*) for mystical intimacy (*uns*—see Smith, *Rabi’a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam*).

The present writer’s comparison of the two *Haft Vádá* texts in Persian found that the theme of pain (*dard*) was a salient motif throughout all of ‘Attár’s seven valleys, whereas an atmosphere of ecstasy pervades

Bahá'u'lláh's portrayal of the same quest. To illustrate this relationship, the translated names of each of the valleys will be paired with their corresponding technical terms in Persian. Illustrative phrases drawn from the English translations of these two texts are cited, as evidence of the recurrence of pain as 'Attár's leitmotif and ecstasy as Bahá'u'lláh's own innovation on 'Attár:

'Attár's *Haft Vádí* ('Attár, *The Conference of the Birds*):

Valley	Name	Meaning	Page Reference
First	Quest (<i>talab</i>)	By pain and grief	170
Second	Love (' <i>ishq</i>)	Paths of misery	173
Third	Gnosis/Insight (<i>ma'rifa</i>)	Path brings sorrow	181
Fourth	Detachment (<i>istighná'</i>)	This journey's pain	190
Fifth	Unity (<i>tawhíd</i>)	Lonely, long austerity	191
Sixth	Bewilderment (<i>hayrat</i>)	A place of pain	196
Seventh	Nothingness (<i>faná'</i>)	This painful place	204

A technical discussion of each of these valleys is given by W. Skalmowski ("The 'Seven Valleys' of 'Attár").

Bahá'u'lláh's *Haft Vádí* (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*):

Valley	Name	Meaning	Page Reference
First	Search (<i>talab</i>)	Nor downhearted	5
Second	Love (' <i>ishq</i>)	Heaven of ecstasy	8
Third	Knowledge (<i>ma'rifa</i>)	Content with decree	12
Fourth	Unity (<i>tawhíd</i>)	Ascend to heaven	17
Fifth	Contentment (<i>istighná'</i>)	From anguish to joy	29
Sixth	Wonderment (<i>hayrat</i>)	Oceans of grandeur	31
Seventh	True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness (<i>faqr-i haqíqí va faná'</i>)	Ecstasy alone	39

Bahá'u'lláh does not strictly follow this sequence of valleys. Elsewhere, in his Essence (lit., 'Gems') of the Mysteries (*Jawáhir al-Asrár*)—another mystical work revealed in Baghdad—there is a section in which the mystic quest takes the form of a journey through seven cities. A comparison of the two sets of valleys/cities is as follows:

Valley	Jawáhir al-Asrár	Haft Vádí
First	Search (<i>talab</i>)	Search (<i>talab</i>)
Second	Love/ Yearning (' <i>ishq wa jadhb</i>)	Love (' <i>ishq</i>)
Third	Unity (<i>tawhíd</i>)	Knowledge (<i>ma'rifa</i>)
Fourth	Wonderment (<i>hayrat</i>)	Unity (<i>tawhíd</i>)
Fifth	Nothingness (<i>faná'</i>)	Contentment (<i>istighná'</i>)
Sixth	Subsistence (<i>baqá'</i>)	Wonderment (<i>hayrat</i>)
Seventh	City of No Name (a) Acquiescence (<i>taslím</i>) (b) Contentment (<i>rida</i>)	True Poverty/Nothingness (<i>faqr-i haqíqí va faná'</i>)

The final valley of the Seven Valleys is "The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness" (*faqr-i haqíqí va faná'*). Schimmel notes that "poverty" (*faqr*) "can become almost a coterminous synonym of *faná'*, ('annihilation')" ("Mystical" 103). *Faná'* is transcendence of the self, and *baqá'* is absorption in God. Traditionally associated with the doctrine of *faná'* is Báyizíd Bistámí (d. 874), but Julian Baldick cautions that there is no early source for this (*Mystical Islam* 37). The positive notion of *baqá'* (lit., "survival" or "abiding") as well as *faná'* has also been ascribed to al-Kharráz of Baghdad (d. 899—Baldick, *Mystical Islam* 40). By the imagery of the journey, the reader is oriented towards the goal: recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as eschatological requital (cf. Fádíl-i-Mázandarání, "Seven Cities in the Spiritual Tourney to God"). At the end of the Valley of Knowledge, on the verge of Unity, Bahá'u'lláh

states: “At this hour the morn of knowledge hath arisen and the lamps of wayfaring and wandering are quenched” (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 16). The Persian text reads: “*Dar ín vaql subh-i-ma’rifat tál shud va chirágh-ha-yi sayr-i-sulúk khámúsh gash*” (*Áthár-i-qalam-i-a’lá* 3:108). The following three texts suggest some of the imagery associated with the key symbol of the journey, which, in context, involves a constellation of symbols:

Personal: Persian Hidden Words #1: “O YE PEOPLE THAT HAVE MINDS TO KNOW AND EARS TO HEAR! The first call of the Beloved (avval surúsh-i-dúst) is this: O mystic nightingale (oy bulbul-i-ma’naví)! Abide not but in the rose-garden of the spirit. O messenger of the Solomon of love (*ay hudhud-i-sulaymán-i-’ishq*)! Seek no shelter except in the Sheba of the well-beloved (sabá-yi jánán), and O immortal phoenix (*ay ‘anqá-yi báqí*)! dwell not save on the mount of faithfulness (qáf-i-vafá). Therein is thy habitation, if on the wings of thy soul thou soarest to the realm of the infinite and seekest to attain thy goal.” (English text: Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words* 22; Persian text: Bahá’u’lláh, *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 24)

Analysis: An equation is drawn between the Beloved, Sheba, and the Phoenix, invoking different symbolisms, but with the same message. Ultimately God is meant. Some Sufis believed that direct beatific vision of God was possible, while others did not. Bahá’í theology rejects the possibility that God can be seen by the human eye. No ziggurat can reach that high. Mortals cannot bridge the chasm between the finite and the infinite. But God can bridge that gap by means of revelation. Because knowledge of the will and attributes of God is relative to the degree that these are revealed, the mystic quest is best served by a pilgrimage to God’s place of revelation. This, according to Bahá’í theophany, changes from age to age. The latest revelation of God to humanity is in the person of Bahá’u’lláh, Bahá’ís hold. This is why the Phoenix is interpreted as quintessentially God, but manifested in God as revealed in Bahá’u’lláh. For this reason, a distinction obtains between Bahá’u’lláh as an historical figure and Bahá’u’lláh’s spiritual reality. Allegorically, God takes the form of the Phoenix, is revealed by the Phoenix, but both is and is not the Phoenix.

Proclamatory: [Untitled Tablet]: “We have revealed Ourselves unto men, have unveiled the Cause, guided all mankind towards God’s Straight Path, promulgated the laws and have enjoined upon everyone that which shall truly profit them both in this world and in the next; yet they have pronounced judgment to shed My blood, whereat the Maid of Heaven hath wept sore, Sinai hath lamented and the Faithful Spirit was made to sigh with grief.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 251)

Analysis: The journey is interior, but progress along the Path requires external piety and righteousness. In *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá’u’lláh makes the requirements of this journey explicit with respect to religious law:

In all these journeys the traveler must stray not the breadth of a hair from the “Law,” for this is indeed the secret of the “Path” and the fruit of the Tree of “Truth”; and in all these stages he must cling to the robe of obedience to the commandments, and hold fast to the cord of shunning all forbidden things, that he may be nourished from the cup of the Law and informed of the mysteries of Truth. (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 39–40)

Holiness and mystical attainments are thus inseparable: “Be swift in the path of holiness, and enter the heaven of communion with Me. Cleanse thy heart with the burnish of the spirit, and hasten to the court of the Most High” (*Hidden Words* Persian #8, English text: *Hidden Words* 24; Persian text: Bahá’u’lláh, *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 27).

Global: Tablet of Maqsúd: “The Great Being saith: O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests (*hifz*) and promote the unity (*ittihád*) of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love (*mahabbat*) and fellowship (*ittifáq*) amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity. This is the straight Path (*sirát-i mustaqím*), the fixed and immovable foundation.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 215 [CX]/*Múntakhabát* 140/*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 168)

Analysis: Here, the mystic “journey” and the “straight Path” are considered inextricable complements. This relationship between adherence to religious law and mystical striving was not always a happy one. Especially in the nineteenth century, many Sufis were antinomian and would consider themselves above Islamic law. In many cases, this led to indulgence in wine and even addiction to opium (both are forbidden by Islam). Despite the rich legacy of

classical Sufism—a legacy that is extended in Bahá'u'lláh's mystical writings—the proliferation of various Sufi orders had not only a demoralizing but also a divisive effect in Islam, which was not given to modern notions of pluralism. Bahá'u'lláh reintegrates the exterior and interior dimensions of religion and predicates authentic mystical attainments on the performance of both.

Mythic

Lote Tree/Sinai

Sinai imagery in Bábí and Bahá'í symbolism has both biblical and quranic roots. Bahá'u'lláh's designated successor and interpreter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (d. 1921), clusters the image of the “Promised One” with traditional Sinai imagery: “The Blessed Beauty [Bahá'u'lláh] is the One promised by the sacred books of the past, the revelation of the Source of light that shone upon Mount Sinai, Whose fire glowed in the midst of the Burning Bush” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 127). Here, the image of Bahá'u'lláh is that of the source of revelation, rather than the recipient of it. The Sinaitic “Fire” is colored crimson.

Assimilation of Sinai imagery in Bahá'í sources is purely typological, a process Wansbrough observes as occurring within Islam: “Exempla preserved and transmitted from the ‘past’ (whether or not fictive) may be the deposit of an antiquarian impulse, but also witness to a concern for present and future” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 130). The adducing of such exemplars is said to be “paradigmatic” in a way that is “ahistorical, formally though not substantively” (Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* 130). The paradigmatic function of Lote Tree/Sinai imagery is to present Bahá'u'lláh as the classic revealer with a new twist: instead of simply being the channel of revelation as have been previous messengers, Bahá'u'lláh claims to have been the source of revelation for those messengers. Some representative texts are as follows:

Personal: Arabic Hidden Words #63: “O SONS OF MAN! The light (*al-núr*) hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount (*al-túr*) and the spirit of enlightenment (*rúh al-saná'*) hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore, free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life (*al-baqá'*) and worthy to meet Me (*al-liqá'*).” (*Hidden Words* 18, Arabic text, Bahá'u'lláh, *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 19–20; cf. Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture” 121)

Analysis: The language of revelation, usually reserved for prophets, is metaphorically applied here to the individual. There is a sense in which the knowledge of God comes about as a personal disclosure or “revelation.” If the heart is likened to Mt. Sinai, the individual's higher self becomes a Moses personified, leading one in an Exodus out of slavery into the Egypt of one's baser passions. The Promised Land is Paradise which, in this case, is attainment to the “Presence” (*al-liqá'*) of God, by which the Manifestation of God (Bahá'u'lláh) is meant. Here the mythic imagery shifts from Sinai in the wilderness to a palace throne, as both symbolize the revelation of God's law and of divine command ethics.

Proclamatory: *Súrat al-Bayán*: “Say: The Revelation sent down by God [lit., the latter turn: *karrat al-ukhrá*] hath most surely been repeated, and the outstretched Hand of Our Power hath overshadowed all that are in the heavens and all that are on the earth. We have, through the power of truth, the very truth, manifested an infinitesimal glimmer of Our impenetrable Mystery, and lo, they that have recognized the radiance of the Sinaic splendor (lit., the denizens of the Mount: *al-túríyún*) expired, as they caught a lightening glimpse of this Crimson Light (*al-núr al-hamrá'*) enveloping the Sinai of Our Revelation (lit., the Sinaic locale: *buq'at al-siná'*). Thus hath He Who is the Beauty of the All-Merciful (*jamál al-rahmán*) come down in the clouds of His testimony, and the decree accomplished by virtue of the Will of God, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 282/*Áthár-i-qalam-i-a'lá* 4:110, Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries” 134)

Analysis: Considering that the Bábís were from a predominantly Muslim background, a word should be said about the literary form: “Say!” In his form-criticism of the Qur'án, Islamicist Richard Bell theorized that the “Say!” passages of the Qur'án were intended for Muslims to commit to memory, for reciting to nonbelievers when the authenticity of the Qur'án or the veracity of Islam was being challenged. Bahá'u'lláh employs this quranic rhetorical device as a form of revelation recognizable by Muslims/ Bábís, while recontextualizing it within a new revelatory context. While the quranic “Say”-passages are somewhat creedal in nature, Bahá'u'lláh's say-passages tended to be more poetic or metaphorical.

This passage is an obvious allusion to the twenty-eighth chapter of the *Qayyúm al-Asmá'*, in which the Báb, through a creative and dramatic use of Sinai imagery, foretells the advent of a messiah. The wealth of imagery used here can easily be glossed over as ornate, when it is, in fact, condensed and highly allusive. A certain measure of metaphorical competency, not to mention biblical and quranic literacy, is required to “decode” such a panoply of metaphors. Even so, there is innovation on some time-honored biblical and quranic imagery. For instance, rarely, if ever, in the Torah or Qur’án is “Crimson Light” to be found. However, in *Qayyúm al-Asmá'* 28 and elsewhere, the Báb references “crimson Light” to the Sinaitic ‘Fire’ or epiphany (tajallí) at Qur’án 7:143 (Lambden. “The Sinaitic Mysteries” 102, citing Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 53). The Báb (*Qayyúm al-Asmá'* 28; cf. the Báb, *Qayyúm al-Asmá'* 60) speaks of himself as “this Blessed Tree (*ash-shajara al-mubáraká*) dyed crimson with the oil of servitude” (Lambden. “The Sinaitic Mysteries” 96; cf. 98), and as “the Crimson Tree (*shajarat al-hamrá'*)” (Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries” 105). Subtle creativity is a feature of the Báb’s own originality, which, while distinctive, is quranically “familiar.”

The preponderating influence on Bahá’u’lláh’s imagery is, in fact, that of the Báb. As Lambden points out, Bahá’u’lláh’s imagery of the “Crimson Light” emanating from the Sinaitic “Fire” harks directly back to *Qayyúm al-Asmá'* 28, which contains a prophetic passage heralding a messianic advent described as “the fierce and crimson Light,” understood to refer to Bahá’u’lláh (Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries” 134; cf. 138, 142). In mythic resonance with Moses/Sinai imagery, this passage is no doubt a proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh’s messianic role for Bábís.

In our third example of Lote Tree/Sinai imagery, the following passages were once thought to belong to Bahá’u’lláh’s “Tablet of the Hair” [*sic*], when it first appeared in the December, 1938, issue of Bahá’í News, in a translation published by permission of Shoghi Effendi. The contents of this “Tablet” have since been determined to have derived from several sources. These are documented in the citations below:

Global: “Tablets” of the Hair:

[1] He is the Almighty! My hair is My Messenger. It is calling aloud at all times upon the branch of Fire within the hallowed and luminous Garden of Paradise, that perchance the inmates of the realm of creation may detach themselves from the world of dust and ascend unto the retreats of nearness—the Spot where the Fire seeketh illumination from the light of the Countenance of God, the Glorious, the Powerful.

O ye that have consecrated yourselves to this Fire! Sing ye melodies, pour out sweet tones, rejoice with exceeding gladness and make haste to attain the presence of Him Who is the Object of adoration, bearing witness that no God is there besides God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, the All-Compelling (Universal House of Justice translation; Arabic: Behmardi, *La’álí al-Hikma*, number 39).

[2] He is the God of Wisdom! My hair is My Phoenix. Therefore hath it set itself upon the blazing fire of My Face and receiveth sustenance from the garden of My Countenance. This is the station wherein the Son of ‘Imrau [Moses] removed from the feet of selfish desire the coverings of attachment to all else but Him and was illumined by the splendours of the Light of holiness in the undying Fire kindled by God, the Potent, the Gracious, the Ever-Forgiving (Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries” 129; Universal House of Justice translation; Arabic: Behmardi, *La’álí al-Hikma*, number 40).

[3] He is the Most Excellent, the Best Beloved! A lock of My hair is My Cord. He who layeth fast hold on it shall never to all eternity go astray, for therein is his guidance to the splendours of the Light of His Beauty (Universal House of Justice translation; Arabic: Behmardi, *La’álí al-Hikma*, number 41).

[4] He is God! My hair is My Veil whereby I conceal My beauty, that haply the eyes of the non-believers among My servants may not fall upon it. Thus do we conceal from the sight of the ungodly the glorious and sublime beauty of Our Countenance (Universal House of Justice translation; Arabic: Behmardi, *La’álí al-Hikma*, number 38).

[5] He is the Eternal! My hair beareth witness for My Beauty that verily I am God and that there is none other God but Me. In My ancient eternity I have ever been God, the One, the Peerless, the Everlasting, the Ever-Living, the Ever-Abiding, the Self-Subsistent.

O denizens of the everlasting Realm! Let your ears be attentive to the stirrings of this restless and agitated hair, as it moveth upon the Sinai of Fire, within the precincts of Light, this celestial Seat of divine Revelation. Indeed there is no God besides Me. In My most ancient pre-existence I have ever been the King, the Sovereign, the Incomparable, the Eternal, the Single, the Everlasting, the Most Exalted.

O peoples of the heavens and of the earth! Were ye to sanctify your ears ye would hear My hair proclaim that there is none other God except Him, and that He is One in His Essence and in everything that beareth relationship unto Him. And yet how fiercely have you cavilled at this Beauty, notwithstanding that the outpourings of His grace have encompassed all that dwell in the billowing oceans of His Revelation and

Creation. Be ye fair therefore in your judgment concerning His upright Religion, for the love of this Youth who is riding high upon the snow-white She-Camel betwixt earth and heaven; and be ye firm and steadfast in the path of Truth (Universal House of Justice translation; Arabic: Behmardi, *La'álí al-Hikma*, number 33).

Analysis: This is a truly mythic cluster of images. While the image that unifies these texts is Bahá'u'lláh's hair, Moses/Sinai imagery features prominently, especially in recurring references to the Sinaitic "Fire," which, as stated above, is associated with crimson as a consistent feature of Bábí/Bahá'í color symbolism. The final selection has global import in that it is addressed to the "peoples of the heavens and of the earth." Especially dramatic is the use of referential "voice" in the narrative. Note how God is represented as speaking in the first person, following which the text suddenly shifts to use of the third person. This is consistent with the image of Moses as the "Interlocutor of God" an epithet for Moses taken up in Bahá'í texts. Such Islamic images as the She-Camel contribute to this rich mix of metaphors. The overall impact of these five passages is to convey the spiritual authority of Bahá'u'lláh effectively.

In Bábí/Bahá'í symbolism, the importance of the symbol of the Lote Tree is indicated by its inclusion as a separate entry in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, defined as follows: "The 'Tree beyond which there is no passing'. Originally, the tree which, in ancient times, the Arabs planted to mark the end of a road. In the Bahá'í Writings, a symbol of the Manifestation of God, the 'Tree beyond which neither men nor angels can pass'; specifically, Bahá'u'lláh. Sometimes called the Divine or Sacred Lote Tree" (s.v. "*Sadratu'l-Muntahá*"). Bahá'u'lláh himself has explicated the symbolic significance of the "Lote Tree" (*sidra*): ". . . The Holy Tree [*sadrat*] is, in a sense, the Manifestation of the One True God, exalted be He. The Blessed Tree in the Land of Za'farán referreth to the land which is flourishing, blessed, holy and all-perfumed, where that 'tree hath been planted" ("Errata" to Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 137, cf. Lambden, "The Sinaitic Mysteries" 145). The Lote Tree is associated with the "Blessed Tree" mentioned in the celebrated "Light Verse" of the Qur'án (Qur'án 24:35). In Bábí and Bahá'í imagery, the Burning Bush and the Lote Tree are equivalent, interchangeable, conflated (Lambden, "The Sinaitic Mysteries" 146).

Social Paradise

Paradise unifies Bahá'í imagery. Paradise evokes all that is ideal on earth. In this respect, Bahá'í formulations of Paradise are far more utopian than eschatological, insofar as a distinct social agenda anti a discrete set of individual behaviors are rhetorically encouraged. Among the informal canon of other key terms, Paradise is given an entry in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (sv. "paradise" and "heaven and hell"). As anthropologically referenced symbols, heaven and hell refer to spiritual (and unspiritual) conditions.

Paradise can be literal or symbolic, or both. In Bahá'í sacred texts, a conscious effort is made to draw correspondences between Earth and Heaven. In this way, celestial Paradise is emblematic of the ideal society on earth. Thus, the "vertical" or otherworldly dimension of paradise intersects with the "horizontal" or realized paradise on earth, from transcendence to immanence. To the extent that images of heaven are associated with the expression of human spirituality at its finest, a true believer can strive to experience paradise on earth.

Personal: Untitled Tablet: "Whoso (*va har nafsi*) hath recognized the Day Spring of Divine guidance and entered His holy court (*subh-i-hidáyat va fajr-i-ahadýat fá'iz shud*) hath drawn nigh unto God and attained His Presence (*bi-maqám-i qurb va vasl*), a Presence which is the real Paradise, and of which the loftiest mansions of heaven are but a symbol. Such a man hath attained the knowledge of the station of Him Who is 'at the distance of two bows,' Who standeth beyond the Sadratu'l-Muntahá." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 70 [XXIX]/*Múntakhabát* 53)

Analysis: Quranic imagery is used in this passage as an allusion to the Archangel Gabriel, who was the source of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad in the form of the Qur'án. Rather than association with Muhammad himself, Bahá'u'lláh is typologically identified with Gabriel. As such, a related epithet of Bahá'u'lláh, used as a prophetic circumlocution, is "Sender of the Messengers" (*mursil-i-rusul*), while the Báb has been called, in the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad, the "King of the Messengers" (*sultán-i-rusul*), while Muhammad has been named by Bahá'u'lláh as the "Seal of Thy Prophets and of Thy Messengers" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 74, based on Qur'án 33:40), where the term for "Messengers" is *sufará'* (sing., *safír*, "ambassador"). This progression—"Seal of the Messengers" (Muhammad), "King of the Messengers" (the Báb), "Sender of the Messengers" (Bahá'u'lláh)—illustrates the explicit teleology of Bahá'í salvation-history.

Earth–Paradise correspondences are reciprocal. In the passage cited, Heaven becomes a symbol of ideal society. Whatever the “loftiest mansions of Paradise” are, it is not Bahá’u’lláh’s purpose to disclose or speculate. Rather, the imagery of celestial habitations is employed to symbolize the potential for unity on Earth. This is the manifestation or fullness of the Kingdom of God on Earth, to use the Lord’s Prayer as an analogy. The intent is to foster improved social relations, as the personal welfare of the few cannot be morally divorced from the welfare of the many.

Proclamatory: Tablet to Czar Alexander II: “O Czar of Russia! Incline thine ear unto the voice of God, the King, the Holy, and turn thou unto Paradise, the Spot wherein abideth He Who, among the Concourse on high, beareth the most excellent titles, and Who, in the kingdom of creation, is called by the name of God, the Effulgent, the All-Glorious. Beware that nothing deter thee from setting thy face towards thy Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 57)

Analysis: In this proclamation to the Czar of Russia, which is still the world’s geographically largest country, Bahá’u’lláh, in rhetorically trying to enlist the support of the Czar, alludes to his own vocation as the revealer of God’s will for humanity in the modern era. However, rather than the Czar himself, it is those who are struck by the claims made in this passage who may be impelled to investigate Bahá’u’lláh and to decide individually on the veracity and authenticity of Bahá’u’lláh’s truth-claims.

The prophet (called the “Manifestation of God” in Bahá’í theophanology) is an extension and effulgence of the divine glory. Bahá’u’lláh, like Jesus Christ in Trinitarian terms, is nominally and functionally “God” for all revelatory intents and purposes. However, Bahá’í doctrine categorically rejects incarnation, a feature of Trinitarian belief, in which Christ is equated with God by virtue of sharing the same “essence.” Bahá’í doctrine excludes consubstantiality. The Manifestation of God is said to be God in nature, not in essence. This distinction contextualizes Bahá’u’lláh’s proclamation to the Czar.

Paradise presupposes the presence of God. It also presupposes the presence of people. Entrance into Paradise is based in part on finding it. Because of its mythic proportions, Paradise has been popularly understood as primordial, otherworldly, and eschatological, but rarely in societal terms of reference, as a paradigm of the ideal faith-community.

Global: Persian Hidden Words #18: “O YE DWELLERS IN THE HIGHEST PARADISE! (*ay ahl-i-firdaws-i-bar-ín*). Proclaim unto the children of assurance (*ahl-i yaqín-rá*) that, within the realms of holiness, nigh unto the celestial paradise, a new garden hath appeared, round which circle the denizens of the realm on high and the immortal dwellers of the exalted paradise. Strive, then, that ye may attain that station, that ye may unravel the mysteries of love from its wind-flowers and learn the secret of divine and consummate wisdom from its eternal fruits.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words* 27; Persian text, Bahá’u’lláh, *Kalimát-i-Maknúnih* 31–32)

Analysis: Some ancient imagery is being recycled in this announcement of a new paradise. The thought orientation is clear: one is asked to conceive of the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh as the proximate locus of Paradise. To become Paradise-worthy, after finding out about the new paradise, one most potentialize the spiritual qualities inherent in every human being. This is not a matter of “meriting” paradise in the faith versus works debates within early Christianity, a debate that resurfaced in the Reformation. In Bahá’í anthropological terms each human being is already a spiritual creature. The goal of human existence, therefore, is to know and love God, to acquire virtues, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. Making the world a better place to live and consecrating one’s time and talent in the path of service to humanity contribute to social evolution, which, in utopian terms, is the bringing about of Paradise on Earth.

A Core Bahá’í Myth?

The unity of the preceding imagery is evident throughout Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, most particularly in the allegorical texts. Most of the key symbols described above are constituent elements in the Tablet of the Holy Mariner, which is probably Bahá’u’lláh’s most well-known allegory. It was on March 26, 1863, that Bahá’u’lláh revealed the Tablet of the Holy Mariner (Walbridge. *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time* 163), in a field known as Mazra’i-yi Vash sháh, on the outskirts of Baghdad (Gail, *My Memories of Bahá’u’lláh* 19).

There are two parts to the Tablet of the Holy Mariner one Arabic, the other Persian. John Walbridge has provided a useful description of this celebrated tablet (*Sacred Acts* 163–65). The Arabic section is independent of, though related to, the Persian, such that each may be considered a distinct Tablet in its own right. Only the Arabic

version has been translated. There may be a certain significance in the fact that the Arabic Tablet of the Holy Mariner was the first complete work of Bahá'u'lláh to be translated by Shoghi Effendi in his capacity as the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. When originally published in the Star of the West magazine on 17 May 1922, it bore the title "The Song of the Holy Mariner." This was later renamed "The Tablet of the Holy Mariner" and is included as an appendix in various editions of Bahá'í prayer books:

"The Tablet of the Holy Mariner"

He is the Gracious, the Well-Beloved!

O Holy Mariner!

Bid thine ark of eternity appear before the Celestial Concourse,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Launch it upon the ancient sea, in His Name, the Most Wondrous,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And let the angelic spirits enter, in the Name of God, the Most High.

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Unmoor it, then, that it may sail upon the ocean of glory,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Haply the dwellers therein may attain the retreats of nearness in the everlasting realm.

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Having reached the sacred strand, the shore of the crimson seas,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Bid them issue forth and attain this ethereal invisible station,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

A station wherein the Lord hath in the Flame of His Beauty appeared within the deathless tree;

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Wherein the embodiments of His Cause cleansed themselves of self and passion;

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Around which the Glory of Moses doth circle with the everlasting hosts;

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Wherein the Hand of God was drawn forth from His bosom of Grandeur;

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Wherein the ark of the Cause remaineth motionless even though to its dwellers be declared all divine attributes.

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

O Mariner! Teach them that are within the ark that which we have taught thee behind the mystic veil,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Perchance they may not tarry in the sacred snow-white spot,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

But may soar upon the wings of the spirit unto that station which the Lord hath exalted above all mention in the worlds below,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

May wing through space even as the favored birds in the realm of eternal reunion;

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

May know the mysteries hidden in the Seas of light.

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

They passed the grades of worldly limitations and reached that of the divine unity, the center of heavenly guidance.

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

They have desired to ascend unto that state which the Lord hath ordained to be above their stations.

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Whereupon the burning meteor cast them out from them that abide in the Kingdom of His Presence,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And they heard the Voice of Grandeur raised from behind the unseen pavilion upon the Height of Glory:

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"O guardian angels! Return them to their abode in the world below,

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"Inasmuch as they have purposed to rise to that sphere which the wings of the celestial dove have never attained;

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"Whereupon the ship of fancy standeth still which the minds of them that comprehend cannot grasp."
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Whereupon the maid of heaven looked out from her exalted chamber,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And with her brow signed to the Celestial Concourse,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Flooding with the light of her countenance the heaven and the earth,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And as the radiance of her beauty shone upon the people of dust,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

All beings were shaken in their mortal graves.
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

She then raised the call which no ear through all eternity hath ever heard,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And thus proclaimed: "By the Lord! He whose heart hath not the fragrance of the love of the exalted and glorious Arabian Youth,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"Can in no wise ascend unto the glory of the highest heaven."
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Thereupon she summoned unto herself one maiden from her handmaidens,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And commanded her: "Descend into space from the mansions of eternity,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"And turn thou unto that which they have concealed in the inmost of their hearts.
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"Shouldst thou inhale the perfume of the robe from the Youth that hath been hidden within the tabernacle of light by reason of that which the hands of the wicked have wrought,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"Raise a cry within thyself, that all the inmates of the chambers of Paradise, that are the embodiments of the eternal wealth, may understand and hearken;
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"That they may all come down from their everlasting chambers and tremble,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"And kiss their hands and feet for having soared to the heights of faithfulness;
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

"Perchance they may find from their robes the fragrance of the Beloved One."
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

Thereupon the countenance of the favored damsel beamed above the celestial chambers even as the light that shineth from the face of the Youth above His mortal temple;
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

She then descended with such an adorning as to illumine the heavens and all that is therein.
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

She bestirred herself and perfumed all things in the lands of holiness and grandeur.
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

When she reached that place she rose to her full height in the midmost heart of creation,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And sought to inhale their fragrance at a time that knoweth neither beginning nor end.
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

She found not in them that which she did desire, and this, verily, is but one of His wondrous tales.
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

She then cried aloud, wailed and repaired to her own station within her most lofty mansion,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And then gave utterance to one mystic word, whispered privily by her honeyed tongue,
Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!

And raised the call amidst the Celestial Concourse and the immortal maids of heaven:

Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!
 "By the Lord! I found not from these idle claimants the breeze of Faithfulness!
 Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!
 "By the Lord! The Youth hath remained lone and forlorn in the land of exile in the hands of the ungodly."
 Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!
 She then uttered within herself such a cry that the Celestial Concourse did shriek and tremble,
 Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!
 And she fell upon the dust and gave up the spirit. It seemeth she was called and hearkened unto Him that summoned her unto the Realm on High.
 Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!
 Glorified be He that created her out of the essence of love in the midmost heart of his exalted paradise!
 Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!
 Thereupon the maids of heaven hastened forth from their chambers, upon whose countenances the eye of no dweller in the highest paradise had ever gazed.
 Glorified be our Lord, the Most High!
 They all gathered around her, and lo! they found her body fallen upon the dust;
 Glorified be our Lord, the Most High!
 And as they beheld her state and comprehended a word of the tale told by the Youth, they bared their heads, rent their garments asunder, beat upon their faces, forgot their joy, shed tears and smote with their hands upon their cheeks, and this is verily one of the mysterious grievous afflictions—
 Glorified be our Lord, the Most High! (*Baha'i Prayers*, 221–29)

This Tablet is filled with Paradise imagery, the original focus of which was the Bábí community, out of which the inchoate Bahá'í community emerged. This narrative constitutes the core Bahá'í myth, of the soul's journey to the presence of God in the person of Bahá'u'lláh, and in fidelity to his Covenant. Scenes of paradise, in heaven above, are used allusively in Bahá'í texts as an imagistic ideal of an ideal faith-community, on earth below. The Tablet of the Holy Mariner concludes with a section in Persian. Based on my own reading of the original text, while consulting Walbridge (*Sacred Acts* 164–65), the following narrative highlights significant words from the Persian.

Bahá'u'lláh, the narrator, introduces himself as “the Persian ‘Iráqí” (*al-fársi al-‘iráqí*). The story resumes. By order of the Holy Mariner (*malláh-i-qudsí*), the passengers embark on the divine ship (*ahl-i-fulk-i-iláhí*), the ancient Ark (*safína-i-qidamí*), to sail upon the Ocean of Names (*bahr-i-asmá'*). The purpose of the voyage was to traverse the stages of human limitations so that, by the leave of God, the travelers could reach the shores of Unity (*shátí'-i-tawhíd*), where they might quaff from the chalice of Oneness (*tajríd*). With the aid of God, the divine Ark voyaged across the Ocean of Wisdom (*áb-i-hikmat*), until it reached a station in which the Stagnant Name (*ism-i-sákin*—probably an allusion to Bahá'u'lláh archrival, Mírzá Yahyá Subh-i-Azal), seized control (*sabaqat girift*) and diverted its course (*majrá*). As a result, the Ark of the Spirit became motionless, prevented from further travel. At this moment, there came a decree from Heaven. The eternal Mariner (*malláh-i-baqá'*) disclosed to the shipmates (*ahl-i-fulk*) one single letter from the mystic, arcane word (*harfí kalmia-yi ikhfá'*), so that, with assistance from the invisible realm, they might pass through the Valley of Bewilderment of their lower natures (*vádí-yi hayrat-i-nafsání*), enter into the joyous atmosphere of spiritual oneness (*vahdat-i-ruhání*), and reach the summit of the divine Qáf of Immortality (*qáf-i-baqá'-yi ján*) [mystic mountain thought to be in Qafqáz], to attain the presence of the Beloved (*liqá'-yi-hadrat-i-jánan*).

As the passengers of the vessel (*ahl-i-kashfí*) received word from the celestial Friend, they opened their mystic wings (*par-i-ma'ná*) at once (*fí al-fawr*) and soared into the holy atmosphere (*havá-yi qudsí*). By the grace of God (*fadl-i-iláhí*) and divine mercy (*rahmat-i-subhání*), they passed over the perilous ravines of self and passion (*'aqabát-i-nafs va havá*), and over the deepest pits of the hells of ignorance and blindness (*darakát-i-ghaflat va 'amá*).

At this time (*dar ín vaqt*), from God's holy realm there blew the breezes of Paradise (*nasá'im-i-ridván*), wafting over their bodies. And after winging their way through the atmosphere of nearness to God (*qurb-i-iláhí*), having traversed the spiritual stages (*sayr-i-maqámat-i-ma'naví*) along the way, the birds (*tayrán*), safe and sound, reached their final destination and alighted (*nuzúl nimúdad*) in the homeland of the lovers (*vatan-i-'áshigán*).

Whereupon the dwellers of this station (*sakkán ín maqám*) arose to serve their guests. The immortal Youths (*ghulám-án-i-báqí*) and the holy Cupbearer (*sáqí-yi qudsí*) proceeded to serve ruby-red wine (*khamr-i-yáqútí*). The guests became so intoxicated with the wine of divine knowledge (*khamr-i-mahríf*) and goblet of divine wisdom (*kás-i-hikmat*) that they were freed from their own existence (*hastí-yi khud*) and everything in the universe.

Attaching their hearts (*dil bastand*) to the beauty of the Friend (*dust*), they remained for centuries (*qarn-há*) in that privileged spiritual station (*án maqám-i-khwush-i-rúhaní*) and that holy, divine rose garden (*gulzár-i-quds-i-rahmání*).

With the utmost bliss did they remain and tarry, until the gales of the divine Test (*nasá'im-i-intihán-i-subhání*) and the winds of the ordeal of the Sovereign (*aryáh-i-iftatán-i-sultaní*) gusted from the Sheba of the command (*amr*) of the Eternal, such that they were attracted to the beauty of the Cupbearer (*jamál-i-sáqí*) and forgot the Immortal Visage (*vajh-i-báqí*). They thus imagined the shadow (*zill*) as the sun (*shams*), and mistook black specks (*ashbáh*) for light (*núr*). Whence they pursued (*qasd namúdand*) mere mirages of the Greatest Name (*mi'árij-iism-i-a'zam*). The birds desired to fly in that atmosphere (*án havá'*), and to enter that Seat and Palace (*mahall*). As they flew, the divine assayers (*sarráfán-i-iláhí*), with the divine touchstone (*bi-mihakk-i-qudsí*) and by the decree (*amr*) of God, descended (*íshán názil shudand*) upon them. Because the assayers did not scent the fragrance of the spiritual Youth (*aryáh-i-ghulám-i-ma'naví*) from the bird-souls, all (*jamí'-rá*) were barred from further progress. And there transpired what had been recorded in the Preserved Tablet (*lawh-i-mahfúz*).

Bahá'u'lláh then warns his followers not to become enamored of the mystic Cupbearer and not to become so inebriated with the wine of knowledge and wisdom. The wayfarer should seek guidance from him and not from the manifestations of Satan. Those who quest after the mystic path should first unite their outward and inward beings.

This Tablet and its interpretation should be referenced to a later revelation known as the *Lawh-i-Hawdaj* or the *Lawh-i-Sámsún*, in which Bahá'u'lláh makes explicit reference to the *Lawh-i-Malláh al-Quds*. Bahá'u'lláh had been living in exile in Baghdad from 1853 to 1863. He left Baghdad on 3 May 1863, for Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman Empire. En route, there was a port on the shore of the Black Sea, known as Sámsún, where Bahá'u'lláh and his entourage arrived in early August, 1863. There, the *Lawh-i-Sámsún* was revealed. Its circumstances of revelation have been recounted in an unpublished narrative of Áqá Muhammad Ridá-yi Qannád-i-Shírází (Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* 195; cf. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 2:6, 16; Gail, *My Memories* 35; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 157). Stephen Lambden ("At the Shore of the Black Sea") has published the previously unpublished Arabic text, to which he has attached a provisional translation and helpful commentary.

In contrast to the Tablet of the Holy Mariner, in which the Mariner himself is said to have been addressed with a "secret, sorrowful Call" (Lambden, "At the Shore" 94), the Tablet of Sámsún is celebratory and joyous in tone. Both these texts narrate what might be thought of as a mystical pilgrimage to the sacred presence of Bahá'u'lláh, the locus of divine revelation, defined as the presence of God. In the Tablet of the Holy Mariner, Bahá'u'lláh is ordered by God to take command of his ship, the Ark of Eternity. This is a metaphorical description of Bahá'u'lláh's assumption of leadership of the Bábí community, symbolized by the Ark. The doleful tones of this tablet indicate the opposition that Bahá'u'lláh would inevitably face from those Bábís who were partisans of Bahá'u'lláh's half-brother and archrival, Mírzá Yahyá Subh-i-Azal. In the Tablet of Sámsún, Bahá'u'lláh's status as leader of the Bábís has consolidated considerably, even though the final rupture with Subh-i-Azal would not take place until 1866 in Adrianople. On the shore of the Black Sea, the ocean voyage, described previously in the Tablet of the holy Mariner, becomes a concrete eventuality, even though the Black Sea itself is "transcendentalized" (Lambden, "At the Shore" 88).

These two works stress the relationship between the integrity of personal faith and the integrity of the spiritual community. Allegories typically involve corporate or collective imagery. Clearly, the "Ark of Eternity" (referred to in later texts as "the Crimson Ark") is the Bahá'í community. The use of this image is anchored in the Bábí constellation of images. Bahá'u'lláh appropriates and enlarges upon the same imagery found in the *Qayyúm al-Asmá'*, in which the Báb is understood as prophesying the advent of Bahá'u'lláh and his community of followers. The Tablet of the Holy Mariner literally describes the "maiden voyage" of the Ark, in the sense that the Maiden of Heaven is sent to assay the fidelity of those who would embark on the Ark, at a time when Bahá'u'lláh was about to make his momentous declaration on the eve of his exile to Istanbul. The loyalty of the passengers (who were among Bahá'u'lláh's fellow exiles) was tested every step of the way. Such Ark/Mariner imagery recurs throughout Bahá'u'lláh's writings, of which the following text is representative: "Verily, the sea of calamity hath surged, and gales have overtaken the Ark of God, the All-Encompassing, the Self-Subsistent. O Mariner! Be not daunted by gales, for He Who is the Breaker of Dawns is with Thee in this darkness which hath enveloped the worlds" (*Isbráq Khávarí* quoting Bahá'u'lláh, trans. by Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* 326; cf. 185).

One can appreciate why Shoghi Effendi, in his new capacity as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith following the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, chose this tablet to be the first complete work of Bahá'u'lláh to offer, in translation, to the Bahá'í community. It is as though the entire allegory was reenacted when Shoghi Effendi took the helm and, as the new Mariner, steered the course of the Bahá'í world from 1921 to 1957. The Tablet of the Holy Mariner is an archetypal allegory replayed in transitions of leadership in Bahá'í history. These transitions precipitated tests of

loyalty among Bahá'ís. The so-called Covenant-Breakers—those who challenged the designated leadership prerogatives, in succession, of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and now, the Universal House of Justice—seriously threatened the integrity of the community. Thus, the import of the Mariner allegory is never lost on Bahá'ís, even though the rest of the imagery is difficult, complex, and recondite. This is why this particular allegory arguably constitutes the core Bahá'í myth, in the voyage of an Ark that is launched in Baghdad and finally comes to rest on the slopes of Mount Carmel.

The Bahá'í Paradigm of Unity

Bahá'í portrayals of Paradise are typically reflexive. Paradise is seen as a reality in the afterlife, but the angelic life begins in this life. Metaphors and scenarios of Paradise function to inspire lofty thought and to model ideal behavior in the present. Virtually all of the imagery used to portray ideal-typic scenes has, in a sense, been “recycled” from previously familiar paradise imagery. This grammar of images rehearses a stock repertoire of that which is heavenly. The specifically Bahá'í use of these key symbols is organized and structured around ideals of unity, ranging from a heart-to-world nexus to a unity of thought and purpose in world undertakings. This integrative worldview is the controlling force behind all of the passages cited above and amply illustrates the Bahá'í paradigm of concentric unity, which is the organizing principle behind almost every glimpse of paradise Bahá'u'lláh inspires.

Notes

1. As a textual note, the sentence from this last passage, “Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch” appears to be a citation from the Tablet to Mánakchí (Daryáy-i-Dánish: Selected from the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh 7–8).

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