



Lawh-i-Maryam (Tablet to Maryam) Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh: A provisional translation and a Commentary

Revealed “soon after . . . (Bahá'u'lláh's) return from Sulaymáníyyih” (Balyuzi 117),¹ this Tablet to Maryam, a few of whose passages are known to the Western readers through their translation by Shoghi Effendi, the Hand of the Cause Hasan M. Balyuzi (1908-1980) and the British orientalist Edward G. Browne (1862-1926), is relevant not only as a source of historical information and of doctrinal and ethical hints but also as an example of Bahá'u'lláh's refined literary style.

Historical information

The “drop of the story” (§32) of Bahá'u'lláh narrated in this Epistle refers to the wrongs He suffered immediately after the attempt on the life of the Shah, perpetrated on 15 August 1852, by two obscure Bábí youth, Şádiq-i-Tabrízî and Fathu'lláh-i-Qumí, driven crazy by the recent martyrdom of their beloved Master (cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 62). Bahá'u'lláh indirectly assures His addressee that He had nothing to do with that attempt, saying that He was first imprisoned and then banished from His country only for His “love for the Beloved” and His “willing submission to the Goal of all desire” (§2), His steadfastness “in the time of heavenly trials” (§3), His generosity “in the revelations of grace” and His determination “in restraining the enemies of the King of Oneness” (§4). And thus His expulsion was

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¹ The “Leiden list” describes it as “164. Lawh-i Maryam Ak1 (Tablet to Maryam from ‘Akka), ‘Akka. Risalih Ayam Tis‘ih 366-371; Rahiq-i Makhtum vol. 2 430-435” and distinguishes it from “165. Lawh-i Maryam B1 (Tablet to Maryam from Baghdad I). Taherzadeh, ‘Revelation’ vol. 1 gives a short extract, cited from the Chosen Highway p. 45.” The same source specifies: “There were several tablets known as Alvah-i Maryam. One of them in INBA [Iranian National Bahá’í Archives (Teheran archives)] 28. Part of one apparently sent from Baghdad is translated in Browne, ‘Materials’ p. 8. Addressee and circumstances see Taherzadeh, ‘Revelation’ vol. 1 13. One is discussed at [Ishraq-Khavari] Muhadirat 462-4. See also Ziyarat-Namih-i Maryam. One Lawh-i Maryam is included in BWC Best Known [“Bahá’í Bibliography. 1. Bahá’ulláh’s Best-Known Works,” in *Bahá’í World* 16:574-5].”

an act of sheer tyranny of Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh (1835-1896), that Bahá'u'lláh stigmatizes here as the “Tyrant of Persia (*ẓálim-i-‘ajam*)” (¶9).² Maryam (1826-1868), the recipient of the Tablet, certainly remembered in what condition He was in December 1852 when He was released from His four months imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál of Teheran, because she had assisted His consort, Ásíyih Khánum (1820c.-1886), to nurse Him for a whole month in the house of her husband, a gesture that won over to her His enduring gratitude.

Maryam was the daughter of Mírzá Karím Namadsáb and Malik Nisá' Khánum, a sister of Mírzá ‘Abbas, better known as Mírzá Buzurg (d.1839), Bahá'u'lláh's father. Thus she was a cousin of Bahá'u'lláh (cf. “Genealogy” and Malik Khusraví 138-9). She was also His sister in law, both because she had married Mírzá Riḍá-Qulí, a half-brother of Bahá'u'lláh, and because her younger sister Fátimih Khánum (1828-1904), after she had become the widow of the famous Shaykh Muḥammad-Taquí ‘Allámih Núrí (1787-1843-4; cf. Nabíl 111), had become Bahá'u'lláh's second wife in 1849 (cf. Mazandarání 5:511). Fátimih Khánum is better known as Mahd-i-‘Ulyá, the Most Exalted Cradle, and the mother of the treacherous Muḥammad-‘Alí (1852 c.-1937).

Mírzá Riḍá-Qulí was the son of the third wife of Mírzá Buzurg, Kulthúm Khánum-i-Núrí, none of whose four surviving children was a supporter of Bahá'u'lláh. He was a physician, and therefore he was known as “Ḥakím.” When Bahá'u'lláh was released from the Síyáh-Chál, he hosted Him and His family in his house “close to the entrance of Masjid-i-Sháh” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 170). He had moved into that house together with his mother, who had inherited it from her father, when, in the last years of his life, Mírzá Buzurg was obliged to sell his complex of houses where he lived with his whole family in Tehran to pay the expenses for the divorce from his latest wife, princess Sháh Begum, Dīyá'u's-Saltānih (cf. Balyuzi 16-7). At the same time Bahá'u'lláh moved with a number of the family members to a rented house “near the gate of Shimírán” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 170). In later years Mírzá Riḍá-Qulí kept apart from Bahá'u'lláh, tried to conceal the fact of their

² Lane gives the following meaning of *‘ajam*: “Foreigners, as meaning others than Arabs; often used as implying disparagement, like barbarians; and often especially meaning Persians” (s.v. *‘jm*). In later years Bahá'u'lláh also stigmatized Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh “as the ‘Prince of Oppressors (*ra’ís az-ẓalimín*)” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 197, *Kitáb-i-Qarn* 397, cf. “Súratu'l-Amín”).

relationship and opposed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s marriage with his niece Shahr-Banú,³ who had been promised to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “because he was afraid that Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh and his ministers would frown on this marriage and take him to task” (Balyuzi 343-4). In the 1870s, although he was held in high esteem in Tehran (cf. Taherzadeh 3:218) and had never supported the new Faith, he “was arrested, conducted to the capital and thrown into the Síyáh-Chál, where he remained for a month” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 198). Bahá’u’lláh maintained communication with him, exhorted him to recognize the new Revelation and wrote a beautiful message seemingly referring to him in His “Lawḥ-i-Pisar-‘Amm (Tablet to the Cousin),” written around 1870 and addressed to His faithful cousin Mírzá Ḥasan-i-Mázindarání.

Maryam, who had been converted by Bahá’u’lláh Himself in the early days of the Bábí Dispensation, always remained a staunch believer. She longed to meet her illustrious Cousin, but her family prevented her from realizing her longing. In her poems she sings her love for the Blessed Beauty:

Were I to drink one or two cups of wine from Bahá’s jar, I would
continue roaring and blazing even after my extinction and death.⁴
(Dhuká’í Bayḍá’í 3:334-40)

She tells of the joy of His presence:

Should I put on the robe of nearness from the hands of the Friend, I
would illumine the heaven and the earth even as the sun. (Dhuká’í
Bayḍá’í 3:334-40)

Obliged as she was to stay far from Him, she used her poetry to give “vent to the gnawing grief she bore for her separation from Him” (Ishráq-Khávarí, *Writings* 628). In this vein she wrote:

The bird of my love was entrapped in the snare of separation, and all
the birds of the air and beasts of the field bewail my story.
(Dhuká’í Bayḍá’í 3:334-40)

³ She was a daughter of Mírzá Muḥammad-Ḥasan, son of Mírzá Buzurg and of his first wife Khán-Nanih, and thus an older half-brother of Bahá’u’lláh, whose loyal follower he always was (cf. Balyuzi 13 and Taherzadeh 1:16).

⁴ All translations from the Persian or Italian are by the authors, unless otherwise specified.

A whole poem is devoted to describe her sadness:

O joy for my rare, bewildered and bleeding heart! Euphrates and Tigris
stream forth from its sea.

Time was when Majnún's tale sounded peculiar to me; now I have two
hundred Laylís and Majnúns in my heart.

The Ravisher of my heart withdrew His tent from the town to the desert;
now, even as Qays,⁵ I turn my face to the desert.

The doleful Zulaykhá⁶ might have a moon in captivity; what I have in
bondage is two hundred shining suns.

Should I tell what the Wheel of Destiny has allotted to my heart, I would
burn up the nine heavens to naught.

For long years I prayerfully sat in the Ka'bih of the Beloved; now a
journey of more than a hundred years divides me from Him.

O Thou Who dwellest beyond the oceans, see how the vessel of my
heart is filled with Thee.

I am so grieved by the pain of remoteness and separation that I make
saddened the hearts of angels and houris.

The page is finished and the secret of my heart remains untold; alas,
what a blazing fire I hold burning in my hearth! (*Dhuká'í Baydá'í*
3:334-40)

Maryam passed away in Teheran in 1868, at 42 years of age, and is buried in the precincts of the Shrine of *Sháh 'Abdu'l-'Azím*, in the outskirts of the capital (cf. *Ishráq-Khávarí*, *Writings* 628), where *Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh* is buried. Bahá'u'lláh revealed several Tablets addressed to her. In a very poetical letter, that begins with "O Maryam, The Spirit of life ascended to the domain of placelessness (*maryama, isiy-i-ján bi la makan*)," ⁷ He consoles her grief for His remoteness: "Shed thee not tears from thine eyes and be not of the anxious ones. Put on the robe of submission and quaff from the wine of acquiescence; and sell the entire world for a mere derham.

⁵ Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah is LaylÍ's lover, nicknamed Majnún, that is, possessed by a demon or *jinn*, because he was driven mad by his love for LaylÍ.

⁶ Zulaykhá is the name ascribed by Muslim tradition to Potiphar's wife who fell in love with Joseph.

⁷ Cf. Bahá'u'lláh et al., *Bishárat* 37-8, provisionally translated by Ms. Gloria Shahzadeh.

Give thy heart to God's irrevocable decree and submit to that which He has ordained for thee" (courtesy of Ms. Gloria Shahzadeh). The most celebrated of these Tablets is "Hurúfát-i-Állín (The Exalted Letters)," ⁸ a Tablet dedicated to the memory of Maryam's only brother, Mírzá Muḥammad-i-Vazír, "reputed to be the very first among the family of Bahá'u'lláh to have been converted by Him to the Bábí Faith in the province of Núr in 1844" (Taherzadeh 1:122). Bahá'u'lláh also revealed for her a "Zíyárát-Námiy-i-Maryam (Tablet of Visitation for Maryam)," in which He honored her with the title "Crimson Leaf (*al-Waraqatu'l-Ḥamrá'*)" (cf. Ishráq-Khávarí, *Ganj* 205; Taherzadeh 1:13).

As to the title "leaf," in the days of the Bábí Dispensation the sister of Mullá Husayn-i-Bushrú'í (1813-1849), the first disciple of the Báb, was known as "Leaf of Paradise (*varaqatu'l-firdaws*)" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials* 177, *Tadhkirat* 273; cf. Nabíl 383n1). Bahá'u'lláh bestowed the title "leaf (*varaqih*)" to the women of His family. Specifically the title *Varaqiy-i-'Ulyá* was bestowed on both His consort, Ásíyyih Khánum, and His daughter Bahíyyih Khánum (1846-1932). Shoghi Effendi translated *Varaqiy-i-'Ulyá* as the "Most Exalted Leaf" (*God Passes By* 108) in the case of Navváb and as the "Greatest Holy Leaf" in the case of Bahíyyih Khánum (*Bahá'í Administration* 25). "She is a leaf that hath sprung from this preexistent Root," Bahá'u'lláh Himself wrote in Tablet addressed to His daughter (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 2). Occasionally He also bestowed this title upon other persons not related to Him. We have a few examples of Tablets addressed to women called "O My leaf" by Bahá'u'lláh. Four such examples are in *Tablets* 251, 254 and 256 and in *Gleanings* # LXVIII (132). He Himself explains why He has bestowed this title on one of those pious women: "We have designated thee 'a leaf'," He writes, "that thou mayest, like unto leaves, be stirred by the gentle wind of the Will of God – exalted be His glory – even as the leaves of the trees are stirred by onrushing winds. Yield thou thanks unto thy Lord by virtue of this brilliant utterance" (*Tablets* 254, *Majmú'ih* 161). 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to the women of His household as "the holy leaves (*awraq al-muqaddasa*)" (*Will and Testament* 18, *Alváḥ* 19; *Tablets* 3:724), "the brilliant Leaves" (*Tablets* 2:291, 425, 3:652) and "the Illumined Leaves, the

⁸ For the text cf. Ishráq-Khávarí (ed.), *Risáliy-i-Tasbíḥ* 242-70; Bahá'u'lláh et al., *Ad'íyyih* 217-8. For a discussion of its contents cf. Ishráq-Khávarí, "Writings" 628-30, Taherzadeh 1:122-5, Walbridge 267-8.

maid-servants of God in this most great prison” (*Tablets* 2:300). He clarified that “submissiveness is the good quality of the maid-servants of God, and humility is the character of the God-fearing leaves who have sprung forth from the Tree of Mercifulness” and invites a correspondent to strive “to be characterized with these, that . . . [she might] be an example for the maid-servants of the Merciful and a leader of the leaves who are moved by the winds of the love of God” (*Tablets* 1:77, emphasis added). After having addressed one of His correspondents as “O leaf upon the Tree of Life (*varaḡiy-i-shahriy-i-ḡáyat*),” He explained that “the Tree of Life . . . is Bahá’u’lláh, and the daughters of the Kingdom are the leaves upon that blessed Tree” (*Selections* 57, *Muntakhabátí* 54). He wrote to other correspondents: “I beg of Him to bestow upon thee a spiritual soul, and the life of the Kingdom, and to make thee a leaf verdant and flourishing on the Tree of Life (*varaḡat-i-rayyánat-i-naḡrat-i-‘alá shajarati’l-ḡayát*), that thou mayest serve the handmaids of the Merciful with spirituality and good cheer” (*Selections* 164, *Muntakhabátí* 161; cf. *Tablets* 1:88); and also: “Be rejoiced for God hath made thee a believing maid-servant in His Holy Threshold and a leaf of the leaves of the Tree of Life” (*Tablets* 1:140). He described Fáṭimih Begum, the widow of Mírzá Muḡammad-Ḥasan (d. 1879), the King of Martyrs, as “a holy leaf of the Tree of God (*varaḡiy-i-muḡaddasiy-i-iláḡhí*)” (*Memorials* 173, *Tadhkirat* 234) and her mother, Khurshíd Begum, known as Shams-i-Ḍuḡá, the Morning Sun, as “a leaf of Thy green Tree of Heaven (*varaḡati shajarati raḡmáníyatika al-kḡaḡrá*)” (*Memorials* 186, *Tadhkirat* 285). He called several Western ladies “enlightened leaf” (*Tablets* 1:158), “brilliant leaf” (*Tablets* 3:708), “confident leaf” (*Tablets* 3:510), “assured leaf” (*Tablets* 1:173, 214), “blessed leaf” (*Tablets* 3:625), “spiritual leaf” (*Tablets* 1:164, 172), “spiritual leaf who art verdant and well-watered by the outpouring from the Kingdom of God” (*Tablets* 3:671), “green leaf of the Tree of Life”;⁹ “wonderful leaf of the Tree of the Love of God” (*Tablets* 1:185), “leaf who art moved by the Breeze of God” (*Tablets*

⁹ “Recent Tablets from Abdul Baha to American Bahais,” in *Star of the West* 10:13 (4 November 1919):245; for the last part of this Tablet cf. *Selections* 311-2. This Tablet is addressed to “Mother Beecher”, Ellen V. Tuller Beecher (1840-1932).

3:685); “pure leaf of the Blessed Tree,”¹⁰ “leaf of the Tree of Life.”¹¹ Sometimes He addressed collectively several women as “leaves”: “O ye leaves of the Paradise of El-Abha” (*Tablets* 1:27); “O ye verdant and flourishing leaves of the Blessed Tree” (*Tablets* 1:28, 29); “O ye maid-servants of the Merciful! Leaves of the Tree of Life [to the ladies of the Kenosha assembly]” (*Tablets* 1:143); “O ye friends and daughters of the Kingdom and leaves of the Blessed Tree” (*Tablets* 2:353); “O ye maid-servants of God and leaves of the Tree of Eternal Life [to the California maid-servants]” (*Tablets* 3:661); and He beseeched “God to strengthen the assured leaves (or women) . . . under all grades, aspects and circumstances” (*Tablets* 1:228-9). And thus it seems He used this title for referring both to especially dedicated believers and to any lady who believed in Bahá’u’lláh. In a Tablet whose original is in the Bahá’í National Archives of the United States He ascribes the “conditions of unconscious obedience” to the “leaves”:

The contingent beings are the branches of the tree of life while the Messenger of God is the root of that tree. The branches, leaves and fruit are dependent for their existence upon the root of the tree of life. This condition of unconscious obedience constitutes subjective faith. But the discerning faith that consists of true knowledge of God and the comprehension of divine words, of such faith there is very little in any age. That is why His Holiness Christ said to His followers, “Many are called but few are chosen.” (in *Bahá’í World Faith* 364).

As to the adjective “crimson (*hamrá*’),” in Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings it is used in at least three allegorical and symbolic senses. First, it is associated with the Manifestation of God, sometimes depicted as the “Crimson Pillar (*rukni’l-ḥamrá*’)” (*Gems* 72, ¶105, “Jawáhir” 82; “Four Valleys” 58, “*Chihár*” 150; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70, *Kitáb-i-Mustaṭáb* 54). Bahá’u’lláh describes Himself as “the Promised One . . . seated upon the crimson cloud (*ghamámi’l-ḥamrá*’) with the hosts of revelation on His right, and the angels of inspiration on His left” (“*Súriy-i-Vafá*” 182, in

¹⁰ “Recent Tablets from Abdul Baha to American Bahais,” in *Star of the West* 10:17 (19 January 1920):320, “Tablets received by American Bahais in 1919,” in *Star of the West* 11:10 (September 1920):164. The first Tablet is addressed to Emily Olsen and Mabel Rice-Wray.

¹¹ “Tablets received by American Bahais in 1919,” in *Star of the West* 11:10 (8 September 1920):166. This Tablet was addressed to Jennie Anderson.

Majmú'ihí 113); as the “crimson Tree (*sidrata 'l-ḥamrá* ’)” (“Lawḥ-i-Siyyid Mihdíy-i-Dahají” 196, in *Majmú'ihí* 121) and as the “fruit-laden Tree, that hath sprung out of the Crimson Hill (*arḍi kathíbī 'l-ḥamrá* ’)” (“Súriy-i-Mulúk” 186, *Súratu 'l-Mulúk* 2).¹² He refers to His Revelation as a “Sinai” enveloped by a “Crimson Light (*núra 'l-ḥamrá* ’)” (“Súriy-i-Bayán” 282, in *Muntakhabátí* 180).¹³ He also mentions the “Crimson Ark (*as-safínatu 'l-ḥamrá* ’)”¹⁴ to describe His Cause;¹⁵ the “crimson Spot (*al-buq 'atu 'l-mubáarakatu 'l-ḥamrá* ’)” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 57, ¶100; Epistle 84) to refer to the prison-city of ‘Akká;¹⁶ the “Crimson Book (*ṣaḥífīy-i-ḥamrá* ’)”¹⁷ to allude to the Book of His Covenant; a “fathomless crimson sea (*al-baḥri 'l-lujjīy 'l-ḥamrá* ’)”

¹² The metaphor of the “crimson tree” was also used by the Báb in His Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', Chapter XXVIII: “This Tree of Holiness, dyed crimson (*al-muḥammarat*) with the oil of servitude, hath verily sprung forth out of your own soil in the midst of the Burning Bush” (*Selections* 52, *Muntakhabát Áyát* 34).

¹³ The metaphor of the “Crimson Light” as referring to Bahá'u'lláh was used by the Báb in His Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', Chapter XXVIII: “And when the appointed hour hath struck, do Thou, by the leave of God, the All-Wise, reveal from the heights of the Most Lofty and Mystic Mount a faint, an infinitesimal glimmer of Thy impenetrable Mystery, that they who have recognized the radiance of the Sinaic Splendour may faint away and die as they catch a lightning glimpse of the fierce and crimson Light (*núra 'l-muḥaymanu 'l-ḥamrá* ’) that envelops Thy Revelation. And God is, in very truth, Thine unfailing Protector” (*Selections* 53, *Muntakhabát Áyát* 35). Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 97.

¹⁴ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 50, ¶84; Epistle 85, 88, 91; *Gleanings* 170, LXXXVI, 1, *Muntakhabátí* 113; “Kalimát-i-Firdawsīyih” 71, *Majmú'ihí* 39; “Lawḥ-i-Dunyá” 97, *Majmú'ihí* 56; “Ishráqát” 120, 134, *Majmú'ihí* 69, 79.

¹⁵ The metaphor of the “crimson ark” as Bahá'u'lláh's Cause was introduced by the Báb in His Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', Chapter LVII: “Indeed God hath created everywhere around this Gate oceans of divine elixir, tinged crimson (*muḥammaran*) with the essence of existence and vitalized through the animating power of the desired fruit; and for them God hath provided Arks of ruby, tender, crimson-coloured (*sufunan min yáqútihi 'l-raṭbati 'l-ḥamrá* ’), wherein none shall sail but the people of Bahá, by the leave of God, the Most Exalted; and verily He is the All-Glorious, the All-Wise” (*Selections* 57-58, *Muntakhabát Áyát* 38). Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 23. The “crimson ark” is called *fulki 'l-ḥamrá* ’ in one of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers (*Prayers* 44, XXXIV, 3, *Munáját* 35).

¹⁶ In the English locution the “embellished, the luminous, the crimson City of God (*madīniy-i-muzayyanīy-i-munavvariyy-i-yáqútiyy-i-iláhi*)” (*Tablets* 260, *Majmú'ihí* 167) crimson translates *yáqútiyyih*, literally ruby red.

¹⁷ Epistle 24; “Lawḥ-i-Dunyá,” in *Tablets* 89, 90, in *Majmú'ihí* 50, 51; “Kitáb-i-‘Ahd,” in *Tablets* 220, in *Majmú'ihí* 135; *Tablets* 242, *Majmú'ihí* 149.

(*Gems* 60, ¶83; *Jawáhir* 69) and a “crimson wine (*khamri’l-ḥamrá*” (“Súriy-i-Haykal” 13, in *Áthár* 1:8) to denote His own words. Second, the word “crimson” implies tests and sacrifice, as for example in the Hidden Words: “Write all that We have revealed unto thee with the ink of light upon the tablet of thy spirit. Should this not be in thy power, then make thine ink of the essence of thy heart. If this thou canst not do, then write with that crimson ink (*al-aḥmari*) that hath been shed in My path. Sweeter indeed is this to Me than all else, that its light may endure for ever” (Arabic # 71). He also mentions “the crimson land (*arḍi’l-ḥamrá*’), above the horizon of tribulation” (“Lawḥ-i-Fu’ád” 177, in *Áthár* 1:167) and, describing the sufferings of the Báb, He writes: “the joy of the world was changed into sorrow in the crimson land (*arḍi’l-ḥamrá*’)” (*Gems* 22, ¶26, *Jawáhir* 26). Third, “crimson” is referred also to advanced stages of spiritual development. In this sense Bahá’u’lláh describes the “city of knowledge (*madínatu’l-‘ilm*)” as “a city whose foundations rest upon mountains of crimson-coloured ruby (*jabála’l-yáqúti’l-ḥamrat*)” (*Gems* 17, ¶20; *Jawáhir* 20) and mentions “the shore of the crimson seas (*bahri’l-ḥamrá*’)” as an “ethereal invisible station” attained by “the dwellers” of “the ark of eternity” (“Tablet of the Holy Marineer” 222, 221, “Lawḥ-i-Malláhu’l-Quds” 4:335).

At the end of our Tablet Bahá’u’lláh mentions three other members of His family. First He refers to Jináb-i-Bábá (¶39). This title, that means “his eminence, the father,” was given by the Bábís to Mírzá Zaynu’l-‘Ábidín, one of Bahá’u’lláh’s four paternal uncles. He had been converted to the Bábí Faith by Bahá’u’lláh Himself in the early days of the Dispensation. He was very devoted to his Nephew. In December 1848 he accompanied Bahá’u’lláh, when He intended to reach Fort Ṭabarsí, tried to protect Him from the bastinado to which He was exposed in that circumstance in Ámul, and as a consequence was so severely beaten that he fainted (cf. Taherzadeh 3:68 and Ruhe 106). He was Bahá’u’lláh’s guest in Baghdad before He retired to Kurdistan (cf. Balyuzi 112-3). Having seen part of Bahá’u’lláh’s vicissitudes with his own eyes, He is called to bear witness to His words. Second He mentions Ḥusnī Khánum (¶39). A Ḥusnīyyih is recorded in the “Genealogy of Bahá’u’lláh” (204/205) as one of Bahá’u’lláh’s half-sisters and by Balyuzi as the daughter of Mírzá Buzurg’s second concubine, a Georgian lady, Nabát Khánum (14), also called Kúchik (Ruhe 23). Finally He mentions Şughrá Khánum (¶39). She may be the daughter that Mírzá Buzurg’s second wife, Khadíjih Khánum, the mother

of Bahá'u'lláh, had from a previous marriage from which she had been widowed. Not much is known of these two half-sisters.

In this Tablet to Maryam, Bahá'u'lláh explains how “after the fetters of . . . [His] foes,” He was “afflicted with the perfidy of . . . [His] friends” (§9). Elsewhere He specifies that His sufferings came mostly from the machinations of His half-brother Mírzá Yaḥyá (1831-1912), “surreptitiously duped” (*Epistle* 168) by a certain Siyyid Muḥammad-i-Iṣfahání (d. 1872c.), described by Shoghi Effendi as “a native of Iṣfahán, notorious for his inordinate ambition, his blind obstinacy and uncontrollable jealousy” (*God Passes By* 112). So great was their disloyalty that at last He decided to “go into retirement” (§10).¹⁸ He alludes to those lonely days, spent in the wilderness, when His only companions were “the birds of the air” and “the beasts of the field” (§11) and refers to His retirement in the mountains of Kurdistan as “the mightiest testimony and the most perfect and conclusive evidence” (§16) of His station. He mentions the circumstances of His return to Baghdad, which He ascribes to “God’s decree” (§19).¹⁹ He remembers the rebirth of the grievously declined Bábí community after His return as a “new Resurrection” (§23); describes the “envy of the foes” (§24), kindled by His courage in facing “enemies of all sects and tribe” (§24); and refers to His willingness to face “the people of sedition (*yá’júj*, literally the people of Gog)”²⁰ (§32) and their constant oppression. The same events are also narrated in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (250-2).

Doctrinal aspects

The mystic oneness of the Manifestations of God

The core of the narration of this epistle is Bahá'u'lláh's sufferings that are repeatedly described as the sufferings of other holy personages of sacred history, comprising

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh spent almost two years (10 April 1854-19 March 1855) in the Kurdistan mountains. First He lived in a remote place named Sar-Galú and later in the town of Sulaymanyah.

¹⁹ The person who discovered His whereabouts and begged Him to come back was Shaykh Sultán, the father-in-law of Bahá'u'lláh's faithful younger brother Mírzá Músá, Áqáy-i-Kalím (1818c.-1887).

²⁰ *Yá'júj* and *Má'júj* of the Qur'an (18:83-98; 21:96) correspond to the biblical Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:2-3; Revelation 20:7-8). In the Qur'an they are described as tribes of wild and destructive nature. In the Traditions they are mentioned as a sign of the Day of Judgment, when they will destroy the civilizations of the world (Bukhari 4.55.565-7, 4.56.797; Muslim 41.6881, 41.6883, 41.6885, 41.6931, 41.6932, 41.7015, 41.7016).

previous Manifestations of God such as the Báb and Abraham. In the very beginning of His letter, He writes: “The wrongs which I suffer have blotted out the wrongs suffered by My First Name [the Báb] from the Tablet of creation” (¶1), a sentence that underlines His oneness with the Báb. Later on He compares His sufferings to those of Imám Ḥusayn, of Abraham and again of the Báb: “This head at one time was raised on a spear-point, at another was delivered into the hands of Shimr,²¹ again I was cast into fire, and again I was suspended. And this is what the infidels have wrought against Us” (¶37). In another passage He describes these holy personages as sharing His grief: “Ḥusayn wept for the wrongs I have suffered and the Friend (Abraham) cast himself into the fire for My grief” (¶7). He writes moreover: “Were thou to examine carefully the matter, the eyes of might are weeping behind the Tabernacle of sinlessness (*surádiq-i-‘iṣmat*) and the people of glory are moaning in the precincts of loftiness” (¶8). Since the attribute of sinlessness (*‘iṣmat*) is typical of the Manifestations of God, this sentence may describe the Manifestations of God sharing Bahá’u’lláh’s grief in the spiritual worlds. And thus all these sentences may be an allusion to the concept of the mystical oneness of the Manifestations of God.

This theme is recurrent in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. The historical figures with whom Bahá’u’lláh identifies Himself are many. Shoghi Effendi lists “Abraham, Moses, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, Imám Ḥusayn, on whom Bahá’u’lláh has conferred an exceptionally exalted station (and) the Báb” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 475). In this vein Bahá’u’lláh writes in a prayer from Kurdistan:

At one time Thou didst deliver Me into the hands of Nimrod; at another Thou hast allowed Pharaoh’s rod to persecute Me . . . Again I was crucified for having unveiled to men’s eyes the hidden gems of Thy glorious unity, for having revealed to them the wondrous signs of Thy sovereign and everlasting power . . . In a later age, I was suspended, and My breast was made a target to the darts of the malicious cruelty of My foes. My limbs were riddled with bullets, and My body was torn

²¹ Shimr, or Shamir, ibn Dhu’l-Jawshan (d.686) was the general of the army of the second Umayyad Caliph Yazíd I (645-683) that slew the Imám Ḥusayn at Karbilá on 10 October 680, cut off his head, raised it on a spear’s point and brought it to Damascus to the Caliph. A prototype of cruelty and brutality, he is represented in the passion plays as dressed in chain-armor.

asunder. (“Súriy-i-Damm [Tablet of the Blood],” in *Gleanings* 88-9, XXXIX; cf. *Call* 96-8).

He also writes: “O Jews! If ye be intent on crucifying once again Jesus, the Spirit of God, put Me to death, for He hath once more, in My person, been made manifest unto you” (*Gleanings* 100, XLVII); and again: “‘Noah’s flood is but the measure of the tears I have shed, and Abraham’s fire an ebullition of My soul. Jacob’s grief is but a reflection of My sorrows, and Job’s afflictions a fraction of My calamity’” (Ibn-i-Fárid qtd. in Bahá’u’lláh, *Gems* 68, ¶95).

Imám Ḥusayn occupies a special position among the personages with whom Bahá’u’lláh identifies Himself. He writes: “That which hath befallen Us hath been witnessed before. Ours is not the first goblet dashed to the ground in the lands of Islám, nor is this the first time that such schemers have intrigued against the beloved of the Lord. The tribulations We have sustained are like unto the trials endured aforetime by Imám Ḥusayn” (“Súriy-i-Mulúk” 204); and also:

And again Thou didst decree that I be beheaded by the sword of the infidel . . . How bitter the humiliations heaped upon Me, in a subsequent age, on the plain of Karbilá! How lonely did I feel amidst Thy people! To what a state of helplessness I was reduced in that land! Unsatisfied with such indignities, My persecutors decapitated Me, and, carrying aloft My head from land to land paraded it before the gaze of the unbelieving multitude, and deposited it on the seats of the perverse and faithless. (“Súriy-i-Damm (Tablet of the Blood)” 88-9)

Shoghi Effendi explains that “Imám Ḥusayn has, as attested by the Íqán, been endowed with special grace and power among the Imams, hence the mystical reference to Bahá’u’lláh as the return of Imám Ḥusayn, meaning the Revelation in Bahá’u’lláh of those attributes with which Imám Ḥusayn had been specifically endowed” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 496). He adds in another letter that this fact “does not make him [Imám Ḥusayn] a Prophet”, Bahá’u’lláh simply “identifies His Spirit with these Holy Souls gone before, that does not, of course, make Him in anyway their reincarnation. Nor does it mean all of them were Prophets” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 498). One of the meanings of this mystic oneness between the Blessed Beauty and Imám Ḥusayn is explained by Bahá’u’lláh Himself (“Súriy-i-Mulúk” 205):

Behold then, O heedless ones, how brightly the fire of the love of God blazed aforetime in the heart of Ḥusayn . . . Say: That same fire now blazeth in Mine own breast, and My wish is that this Ḥusayn may lay down His life in like manner, in the hope of attaining unto so august and sublime a station, that station wherein the servant dieth to himself and liveth in God, the Almighty, the Exalted, the Great.

One of the central aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's Manifestation is His readiness to give His life for humankind. He writes for instance:

From the very day Thou didst reveal Thyself unto me, I have accepted for myself every manner of tribulation. Every moment of my life my head crieth out to Thee and saith: "Would, O my Lord, that I could be raised on the spear-point in Thy path!" while my blood entreateth Thee saying: "Dye the earth with me, O my God, for the sake of Thy love and Thy pleasure!" Thou knowest that I have, at no time, sought to guard my body against any affliction, nay rather I have continually anticipated the things Thou didst ordain for me in the Tablet of Thy decree. (*Prayers and Meditations* 108-9, LXVI, 7)

The sufferings of the Manifestation of God as atonement

The Christian idea of the sufferings of the Manifestation of God as an atonement for the salvation of humankind is thus seemingly confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh: "We, verily, have come for your sakes, and have borne the misfortunes of the world for your salvation," He writes in His "Lawḥ-i-Aqdas," a Tablet addressed to the Christians (10). The climax of Christ's sufferings was His Passion, characterized by the extreme physical pains caused by the horrible treatment He was exposed to in those forty hours. Bahá'u'lláh was also exposed to physical tortures, first when He was bastinadoed at Ámul in 1848 and then in the terrible months between 16 August and the half of December 1852, the days spent in the Síyáh-Chál under the weight of the notorious chain "Qará-Guhar" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 77), weighing about 50 kilos. In later days He was exposed to imprisonment, isolation and deprivation, but most of all, like all the Manifestations of God, He had to face the stubbornness and stupidity of all the people who rejected His healing message, in the full awareness of the consequences their refusal will bring upon all humankind in centuries as yet to come. All the horrors of the twentieth century, and others still unaccomplished,

were very clear in His all-knowing and all-loving eyes. Is there any greater pain conceivable for a loving Father? However Bahá'u'lláh is certainly not teaching a new dolorism, that is, salvation wrought by the sheer suffering of the Manifestation of God. In this Tablet to Maryam, as in many others, He describes His pains as an example for humankind to follow: acceptance of whatever may come from God's decree in an attitude of love of God, willing submission to His decree, resignation, steadfastness, detachment, fortitude, spirit of sacrifice, becoming nothing, even physically if required, at His holy Presence. Bahá'u'lláh wants Maryam, in this case a human prototype, to know about His grief, to share it with Him, and to moan for Him. And this concept is perfectly in line with the paramount idea that salvation also comes through His teachings, "the true remedy which will heal man from all sickness and will give him the health of the divine kingdom" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 152), and through the power of the spirit of Faith that He inspires in whoever observes His "commandments, for the love of . . . [His] beauty" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 22, ¶4).

The uniqueness of His Day and His Cause

Another doctrinal aspect of this Tablet is the uniqueness of His Day and His Cause, a Cause that "is greater than the creation of the earth and of the heavens" (¶15), and whose recognition Bahá'u'lláh identifies with "the Realm of eternal reunion (*bisát-i-uns*, literally carpet of reunion; cf. *Kitáb-i-Mustaṭāb* 197, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 255)" (¶25), the highest goal of the Sufi path, achieved only by the most prominent spiritual Masters. Therefore, Maryam is exhorted to "appreciate the value of these days, for soon . . . [she will] not see the celestial Youth in the pavilion of the created world," and she will "behold the signs of despondency in every thing," and "the people biting their fingers' ends in their longing for this Youth, and . . . how all of them will search after Him throughout the heavens and the earth and will not attain unto His presence" (¶31). Words extolling the greatness of His Day and of His Cause recur frequently in His writings. For example, He writes ("Súriy-i-Ra'ís" 148-9):

Had Muḥammad, the Apostle of God, attained this Day, He would have exclaimed: "I have truly recognized Thee, O Thou the Desire of the Divine Messengers!" Had Abraham attained it, He too, falling prostrate upon the ground, and in the utmost lowliness before the Lord thy God, would have cried: "Mine heart is filled with peace, O Thou Lord of all that is in heaven and on earth! I testify that Thou hast unveiled before

mine eyes all the glory of Thy power and the full majesty of Thy law! I bear witness, moreover, that through Thy Revelation the hearts of the faithful are well assured and contented.” Had Moses Himself attained it, He, likewise, would have raised His voice saying: “All praise be to Thee for having lifted upon me the light of Thy countenance and enrolled me among them that have been privileged to behold Thy face!”

He describes His Day as “the Day of God.” He writes for example:

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. All the divers kindreds of the earth have, likewise, yearned to attain it. (“Súriy-i-Qamís” 11)

And in the “Súriy-i-Haykal,” He explains that “the Day of God is none other but His own Self, Who hath appeared with the power of truth. This is the Day that shall not be followed by night, nor shall it be bounded by any praise, would that ye might understand!” (29). In *Gems of Divine Mysteries* He describes His Day as “the Day of Resurrection,” when God “promised all men that they shall attain unto His own presence”:

Know then that the paradise that appeareth in the day of God surpasseth every other paradise and excelleth the realities of Heaven. For when God – blessed and glorified is He – sealed the station of prophethood in the person of Him Who was His Friend, His Chosen One, and His Treasure amongst His creatures, as hath been revealed from the Kingdom of glory: “but He is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets”, He promised all men that they shall attain unto His own presence in the Day of Resurrection. In this He meant to emphasize the greatness of the Revelation to come, as it hath indeed been manifested through the power of truth. And there is of a certainty no paradise greater than this, nor station higher, should ye reflect upon the verses of the Qur’án. Blessed be he who knoweth of a certainty that he shall attain unto the presence of God on that day when His Beauty shall be made manifest. (42-3, ¶58)

Passages such as these pose a challenge to His followers. Do they imply that this Manifestation is greater than any previous one? Do they justify an exclusivist interpretation?

In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* Bahá'u'lláh writes that “it hath been demonstrated and definitely established, through clear evidence, that by ‘Resurrection’ is meant the rise of the Manifestation of God to proclaim His Cause, and by ‘attainment unto the divine Presence’ is meant attainment unto the presence of His Beauty in the person of His Manifestation” (169) and explains that the Day of Resurrection is “the Day of the rise of God Himself through His all-embracing Revelation” (142). In the same book, He suggests the idea that the term “Seal of the Prophet,” which the Muslims interpret as the proof of the finality of Muhammad’s revelation, or any other attribute ascribed to their Prophet, can be ascribed to any other Manifestation of God, so that “were they all to proclaim: ‘I am the Seal of the Prophets,’ they verily utter but the truth, beyond the faintest shadow of doubt” (178).

In light of these explanations, it seems that the emphasized greatness of this specific Day of God should be read in the context of progressive Revelation. In its essential reality, each Day of God is the greatest; it is the day of the “attainment unto the divine Presence.” In its phenomenal reality each Day of God is greater than the previous ones, because humankind has in the meantime advanced in its unending journey towards its Creator, and thus the Sun of Truth can reveal a fuller measure “of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it” (Bahá'u'lláh, “*Lawḥ-i-Ibráhím*” 87). And since the hand of God will never be chained up (cf. *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 136), an increasingly fuller measure of the potencies of the Sun of Truth will be revealed in future Days of God. And, although in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words “centuries, nay, countless ages, must pass away ere the Day-Star of Truth shineth again in its mid-summer splendour, or appeareth once more in the radiance of its vernal glory” (qtd. in *World Order* 167), in a remote future day “the Day-Star of Truth” will shine again “in its mid-summer splendour.”

Progressive revelation

The concept of progressive revelation is another Bahá’í doctrine mentioned in this Tablet. This doctrine applies to two different contexts. On the one hand, it applies to “the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestation of Adam with that of the Báb” described by Bahá'u'lláh in His “*Lawḥ-i-Riḍá* (Tablet of

Radiant Acquiescence)” (74). On the other, it applies “even within the ministry of each Prophet” (The Universal House of Justice, “Introduction” 5). In line with this principle Bahá’u’lláh did not disclose His station immediately after the first Intimation of His mission He received in the Síyáh-Chál of Teheran in October 1852. And thus He wrote to His cousin Maryam: “The celestial mysteries should not be unraveled and it is not pleasing that the heavenly secrets be divulged, that is the mysteries of the inner treasures of My soul, this I mean, and nothing else” (¶13). In this Tablet, as in other Writings revealed before 21 April 1863, He simply alluded to this high Station with such words as

Therefore this evanescent Servant arose for the protection and the exaltation of the Cause of God, in such wise that one would say that a new Resurrection (*qiyámat mujaddad^{an}*) had come to pass, and the greatness of the Cause was manifested in every city, and witnessed in every land, so that all the authorities showed courtesy and good manners. (¶23)

Only in later years, He openly described His Revelation as “a new resurrection”: “The heaven of religions is split and the moon cleft asunder and the peoples of the earth are brought together in a new resurrection (*hashri badi’*)” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 247-8, *Majmú’ih* 154), He wrote in a Tablet revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.²²

The importance of being aware of spiritual reality

Finally, in this Tablet to Maryam (¶17), Bahá’u’lláh also alludes to the importance of being aware of spiritual reality.

Yea, a man of insight (*ṣáhib-i-baṣar*) is needed to behold the Most Great Beauty (*manẓar-i-akbar*, cf. “Tablet of Aḥmad” ¶2) and whosoever has no inner eye (*baṣar*) is deprived of perceiving the grace of his own beauty, how much more of the Sacred and Divine Beauty.

The “inner eye (*baṣar*)” is described by Bahá’u’lláh as both a prerequisite for and a fruit of the recognition of His station. He writes in the Kitáb-i-Íqán that

²² Cf. “Hence there was a second blast on the Trumpet, whereupon the Tongue of Grandeur uttered these blessed words: ‘We have sounded the Trumpet for the second time.’ Thus the whole world was quickened through the vitalizing breaths of divine revelation and inspiration” (Bahá’u’lláh, “Ishráqát” 131).

when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart . . . the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, [will] shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn . . . [and will] confer such new life upon the seeker that he will find himself endowed with a new eye (*chishm-i-jadíd*), a new ear (*gush-i-badí'*), a new heart (*qalb*), and a new mind (*fu'ád tázih*). (*Kitáb-i-Mustatáb* 151, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 196)

These words can be easily read in their intellectual, “secular” I would say, meaning, that is, as describing the condition of any person who has understood the idea that Bahá'u'lláh is the Founder of the new World Order. But that may also have a “mystical” meaning, that is, they may describe a person who has bent her utmost effort to achieve that communion with the Soul of the Manifestation, that, in Shoghi Effendi's words “the Martyrs seemed to have” achieved “and that “brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Unfolding* 406). The importance of achieving this spiritual awareness is emphasized in the following paragraph of our Tablet to Maryam:

Look how the sea is calm and peaceful in its bed in majestic dignity and composure. But by reason of the gales of the Will of the Eternal Beloved, unnumbered forms and shapes become visible on its surface and all these billows seem contrary and adverse. And thus all people busy themselves with the waves and are shut out as by a veil from the might of the Sea of Seas, from whose movement the signs of the Unconstrained become manifest. (¶28)

Thus, His invitation to open our inner eye merges with the central teaching of His Faith, which is the theme of unity and oneness. In this case it is the highest Oneness we as human beings are able to understand. It is neither the oneness of humankind, nor the oneness of the Manifestations. Its is nothing less than our inner awareness of the fact that

The existence of all shadows endures or moves away by reason of the existence of the sun. Should the sun withhold its grace for but a moment, everything would end in the Pavilion of nothingness. O the pity and the

regret that people should busy themselves with perishing appearances and be deprived of the Dayspring of eternal holiness. (§30)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained the same concept thus: “the phenomena of the universe find realization through the one power animating and dominating all things, and all things are but manifestations of its energy and bounty. The virtue of being and existence is through no other agency” (*Promulgation* 285). Only this awareness will assist us to understand the deeper meaning of the paramount “oneness of the world of humanity” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 285). This is the essential difference between a Bahá’í, who should be turned towards “the Day Star of unfading glory” (§30) and the best modern secular intellectuals, who are interested in “fleeting shadows” (§30). In other words, the latter are satisfied with their intellectual understanding of reality and firmly believe that this is all they can achieve. The former knows that her intellectual understanding of the oneness of humankind is just a stepping stone of a deeper awareness of reality. Any intellectual understanding, as important as it is as a stepping stone towards the new world order, is not of great use, if it is not assisted by the power created by the spiritual awareness of this doctrine, that is, by the power of the “Spirit of Faith (*al-rúhu’l-ímání*) which is of the Kingdom (of God) (*al-malakúti*)” and which in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words,

consists of the all-comprehending Grace (*al-fayḍu’l-shámil*) and the perfect attainment (*al-fawzu’l-kámil*, literally perfect salvation, fruition, achievement) and the power of sanctity (*al-quwwatu’l-quḍsiyyat*) and the divine effulgence (*al-tajallíyu’l-raḥmání*) from the Sun of Truth (*shamsu’l-ḥaqíqat*) on luminous light-seeking essences (*al-ḥaqá’iqu’l-núráníyyatu’l-mustafídat*) from the presence of the divine Unity (*al-fardáníyyat*). And by this Spirit is the life (*ḥayát*) of the spirit of man (*al-rúhu’l-insání*), when it is fortified thereby, as Christ saith: “That which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” (*Tablets*1:116; *Makátib*1:129)

Without the assistance of this “Spirit of Faith,” anyone will remain “shut out as by a veil from the might of the Sea of Seas, from whose movement the signs of the Unconstrained become manifest” (§26). This inner change, this “mystic, all-pervasive . . . change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual” is “indefinable” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 163-4), and yet

it is the practical result of straying “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’” (Bahá’u’lláh, Seven Valleys 39), that is, is the result of service. In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words:

Whensoever ye behold a person whose entire attention is directed toward the Cause of God; whose only aim is this, to make the Word of God to take effect; who, day and night, with pure intent, is rendering service to the Cause; from whose behaviour not the slightest trace of egotism or private motives is discerned – who, rather, wandereth distracted in the wilderness of the love of God, and drinketh only from the cup of the knowledge of God, and is utterly engrossed in spreading the sweet savours of God, and is enamoured of the holy verses of the Kingdom of God – know ye for a certainty that this individual will be supported and reinforced by heaven; that like unto the morning star, he will forever gleam brightly out of the skies of eternal grace. (*Selections* 71-2)

Ethical aspects

The ethical aspects of this Tablet are strictly connected with the spiritual aspect of the importance of the inner eye. The theomorphic character of Bahá’í ethics may draw us to understanding spirituality as mere orthopraxis, or a way of being and living that is consistent with the ethical teachings of the Faith. One of the reasons why Bahá’u’lláh narrates in this Tablet to Maryam, as in other Tablets, some of the episodes of His life may be that He wants His behavior to become an example for His followers. In this vein, He writes:

My expulsion from My country was for no other reason except My love for the Beloved, and my removal from My land was for no other motive but My willing submission to the Goal of all desire. (¶2)

And with these words, He seemingly recommends accepting whatever may come in the path of His service. He also writes (¶3):

In the summons of God’s decree I was even as a kindled and shining lamp and in the time of heavenly trials I was as steadfast as a mountain.

And with these words He seems to recommend fortitude and steadfastness, as important virtues in our daily lives, if we want to comply with His words: “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty” (*Kitab-i-Aqdas* 20, ¶4). He writes moreover:

In the revelations of grace I was even as a raining cloud and in restraining the enemies of the King of Oneness as a blazing fire. (¶4)

And we may understand from these words that we should be able to reflect in our daily lives both the divine attributes of beauty and of majesty. This advice should warn us against the Italian “Buon-ismo,” that is “an excessive and moralistic benevolent attitude in social relation . . . an excessive, and sometimes mawkish or pathetic sentimentalism” (Battaglia 174), translated by Gigi Padovani, an Italian journalist of the well-known newspaper of Turin *La Stampa*, as “Good-ism”²³ and reminiscent of the “terminal niceness” sometimes ascribed to the Bahá’ís (cf. Martin). All these statements of ethical importance are poignantly summarized thus:

This Youth departed in such a state that My succor were the drops of My tears, My confidants the sighs of My heart, and My friend My pen, and My companion My Beauty, and my army My reliance, and my people (*hizb*) My trust. (¶33)

Whatever may come, a lover of the Blessed Beauty should be ready to do whatever is required from him so that he may become fully aware of both “the grace of his own beauty” and “the Sacred and Divine Beauty” (¶17).

Orthopraxis is not tantamount to spirituality

However, good ethical behavior does not seem to be the only prerequisite of spirituality. Spirituality or “spiritual progress (*taraqqíy-i-rawḥání*)” (‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Majmú’ih* 378; *Promulgation* 142) is “the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Baha’i News* 102 [August 1936] 3). One of the “spiritual virtues and powers” that should be acquired is the capacity “to perceive the Divine reality of things (*ḥaqáyiḳ-i-áshyá*, literally: the essential realities of all things) . . . by the power of the Holy Spirit (*az nafathát-i-rúḥu’l-qudus*, literally: by the issuing forth of the Holy Spirit)” (‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Majmu’ih* 138;

²³ Qtd. in Povoledo, “The politics of Nutella,” *International Herald Tribune*, Friday, 10 December 2004.

Paris Talks 83, 28.7). Therefore, although undoubtedly there is no spirituality without good ethical behavior, spirituality implies an awareness that goes beyond the best ethical behavior. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly explains this concept: “Although a person of good deeds is acceptable at the Threshold of the Almighty, yet it is first ‘to know (*dánistan*),’ and then ‘to do (‘*amal*)’” (*Tablets* 3:549). In His explanations to the leading American Bahá’í teacher and philanthropist Laura Clifford-Barney (1879-1974) He shed a greater light on what he means: “if to the knowledge of God (‘*irfán-i-iláhi*) is joined the love of God, and attraction, ecstasy and goodwill, a righteous action is then perfect and complete. Otherwise, though a good action is praiseworthy, yet if it is not sustained by the knowledge of God, the love of God, and a sincere intention, it is imperfect” (*Some Answered Questions* 302, *Mufávaḍát* 211). On the same issue He wrote:

If thou wishest the divine knowledge (‘*irfán-i-iláhi*) and recognition (*shinásá’i*), purify thy heart from all beside God, be wholly attracted to the ideal, beloved One; search for and choose Him and apply thyself to rational and authoritative arguments. For arguments are a guide to the path and by this the heart will be turned unto the Sun of Truth. And when the heart is turned unto the Sun, then the eye will be opened and will recognize the Sun through the Sun itself. Then man will be in no need of arguments (or proofs), for the Sun is altogether independent, and absolute independence is in need of nothing, and proofs are one of the things of which absolute independence has no need. Be not like Thomas; be thou like Peter. I hope you will be healed physically, mentally and spiritually. (*Tablets* 1:168, *Makatíb* 8:119)

In this vein Bahá’u’lláh writes to Maryam:

Be a companion of the Self of the Merciful (*naḥs-i-raḥmán*) and from the association with and resemblance to Satan enter beneath the shelter of the sanctity of the Bountiful, that perchance the hand of Divine grace may draw thee away from the paths of passion unto the heavens of everlasting might and glory. (§29)

It is the path of the Four Valleys, a path that goes layer after layer from the outer expression of the individual to her inner core, her consciousness. First, from the outer

layer of the self it goes to the inner core of “the pleasing soul” (50). Second, from the outer layer of a “feeble brain” it moves towards the core of a “ready . . . heart” (52, 54). Third, from the outer layer of the “loving seeker” (54) it descends to the core of a “mote of knowledge” released from “desire and the lowly clay” (57). And finally, from the outer layer of a “wayfarer” in “the snow-white path” (58) it advances towards the core of “full awareness, of utter self-effacement” (60). Only in this condition the “waves” will stop shutting the seeker “out as by a veil from the might of the Sea of Seas” (¶28) and the seeker will enter “the heavens of everlasting might and glory” (¶29).

Literary aspects

Bahá'u'lláh wrote in the “Súriy-i-Haykal” that He has revealed His writings “in nine different modes” (¶51, in *Summons* 27) and the prominent Persian Bahá'í scholar, Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání (1880c.-1957), has tried to identify them (cf. Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 1:42). If we adopt his classification, our Tablet to Maryam may fall within the category of “Tablets exhorting men to education, goodly character and divine virtues” (Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 1:42). Specifically it can be considered as an example of the letters, *murásilát*, written by Bahá'u'lláh to the believers who were far from Him, such as the Tablet addressed to “May handmaiden and My Leaf” and published in its English translation in *Tablets* 251-3.

The style chosen by Bahá'u'lláh for this warm missive to His beloved cousin, certainly worrying for Him and for His difficulties, is *saj'*. The rhymed and rhythmic prose known as *saj'* has pre-Islamic origins. It was used by the ancient Arabic *káhin*, soothsayers and sorcerers. Muhammad ennobled it into the inimitable style of the Qur'an. The Italian orientalist Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988) remarks that “the same inimitability of the Qur'anic prose, sacred and unapproachable by definition, prevented this device from being generalized as the normal prose in the early days of Arabic literature” (in Pagliaro and Bausani 505). The *saj'* flourished only after the fourth century AH (tenth century AD). The main characters of Persian *saj'*, much loved by the greatest Persian prose-writers, are: rhyme, comprising the use of homomorphic words; rhythm, in the absence of any strict observance of the consistent rhythmic patterns typical of poetry; a clever utilization of the rhyming and rhythmic possibilities of the Persian nominal and verbal forms; a skillful suppression of the auxiliary verbs, which given their position at the end of the sentences may

create according to Bausani “cloying repetitions” (in Pagliaro e Bausani 506); the use of double lines of parallel words, known as *hashv* or redundancy; the use of Arabic and/or scholarly words, locutions or even whole sentences; the use of quotations from the Qur’an, the Traditions, the Arabic and Persian poets; and the intention of ““borrowing some elegance from every man of letters”” (Browne, *Literary History* 88). The use of rhyme and rhythm typical of poetry and the simplicity of Persian syntax, that prefers paratactic constructions, contribute to create an exquisite and refined prose that has the same effects as poetry itself. Besides, the lack of the prosodic rules of poetry enables *saj’* writers to reproduce the same trenchant effects of poetry while benefiting from the flexibility of prose. The Persian literature is rich in wonderful examples of this literary form. However, in later centuries *saj’* has sometimes degenerated into “a certain monotony of topic, style, and treatment” as well as a “flabby, inflated, bombastic style” (Brown, *Literary History* 2:88, 89).

Bahá’u’lláh’s Persian prose has been universally considered of the highest level and greatest elegance. His style, specifically that of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, has been eulogized by Shoghi Effendi as “at once original, chaste and vigorous, and remarkably lucid, both cogent in argument and matchless in its irresistible eloquence” (*God Passes By* 138). Browne stressed its “simplicity and directness” and “concise and strong” style and compared it to that of “the *Chahár Maqala*, composed some seven centuries earlier. . .” (*Literary History* 2:89). Balyuzi qualified the Hidden Words’ prose as “lucid, captivating” (159) and that of the Seven Valleys as “matchless in its beauty, simplicity and profundity” (161). Bausani (1921-1988) mentioned Bahá’u’lláh’s “extremely beautiful traditional style,” described it as “a Sa’dian style, both simple and elegant” and complained that it has “unfortunately” been “abandoned in favor of the more realistic and spoken, albeit sometimes also more complicated, tone of the contemporary prose” (in Pagliaro and Bausani 538).

The first formal element immediately perceived by any reader of this Tablet to Maryam is its poetical musicality. This element characterizes almost all Bahá’u’lláh’s writings of the Baghdadi period and is a fundamental aspect, although in different modes, of His Tablets of later years. The musicality and the rhythmic assonance of the short successive sentences are reminiscent of the best examples of Persian rhymed or ornate prose, *nathr-i-árástih*, typical of the compositions of such ancient authors as the Sufi ‘Abdu’lláh Anṣarí (1006-1088), who composed beautiful

Munájját, Prayers, as Nidhámí-i-‘Arúdí (the Prosodist) of Samarqand (d.1174), the author of *Chahár Maqála* (Four Discourses) to which Browne compared the prose of the Kitáb-i-Íqán (cf. *Literary History* 2:336) and as the Persian poet and prose writer Sa‘dí (1184-1291), the author of the celebrated *Gulistán* and *Bústán*. They are also very close to the *Munsha‘át*, prose compositions, of the more recent Mírzá Abú’l-Qásim, Qá‘im Maqám (vicegerent) of Faráhán (1779-1835), whose “Sa‘dian style” is characterized according to Bausani by (in Pagliaro e Bausani 535)

a great attention to the harmony of the periods; the use of short sentences; a great skill in placing the various components of a renewed sentence in a non-monotonous and varied correspondence; the abolition of excessive titles, complimentary remarks and litanies; a smaller number of continuous quotations of Arabic and Persian verses in the prosaic text; the elimination of undue metaphors and similitudes of lousy taste; concision.

These merits may also be ascribed to this Tablet to Maryam, which is moreover characterized by short sentences; the couplets of musically parallel sentences; the elimination, whenever it is possible, of redundant auxiliary verbs; the use of scholarly words of great poetical and musical impact; the specific combination of scholarly words rich in mystical meanings and metaphorical and symbolic images, used to enhance the semantic effect of the words; and other formal constructions. All these features contribute to creating a poetical structure characterized by an unceasing and pressing rhythmical cadence resulting from the exact and perfect disposition of each single word. The ensuing rhythmic harmony runs across the whole Tablet and enables each word to express the highest possible level of communication and incisiveness.

An analysis of the first four sentences will now illustrate some of the Tablet's formal aspects.

1. *ay maryam! mazlúmiyyat-am mazlúmiyyat-i-ism-i-avval-am rá az lawh-i-imkán mahv nimúdiḥ*
2. *va az saḥáb-i-qaḍá amṭár-i-balá fī kulli ḥayn bar in jamál-i-mubín báridih. (¶1)*

The first two sentences of the Tablet offer an example of *jinás*, rhythmic assonance, in the repetition of the word *mazlúmiyyat* (wrongs), in the use of the two

homomorphic words, *lawḥ* (Tabled) and *maḥv* (blotted out), and of the two rhyming locutions *saḥāb-i-qadā* (clouds of God's decree) and *amṭār-i-balā* (showers of affliction), that also are an example of *tashbīḥ*, poetical similitude. They also comprise two composed verbs, *nimúdiḥ* (translated as “blotted out” together with *maḥv*) and *báridiḥ* (rained), that, besides rhyming with one another, are also deprived of their auxiliary verbs.

3. *ikhráj az vaṭan-am sababí juz ḥubb-i-maḥbúb na-búdiḥ*

4. *va dúrí az dyár-am illatí juz riḍáy-i-maqṣúd. (¶2)*

Sentences three and four are related to one another by the subtle thread of their rhythmic assonance and the redundant ornamental preciousities. They are rhymed through the rhyming and homophonic words, *vaṭan-am* (My country) and *dyár-am* (My land), *sababí* (reason) and *illatí* (motive), and locutions, *ḥubb-i-maḥbúb* (love for the beloved) and *riḍáy-i-maqṣúd* (willing submission to the Goal of all desire). The formal symmetry of the two sentences enhances the efficacy of the expressed concepts, which seems to be the final intention of the Writer.

Other aspects of Arabic and Persian rhetoric, seemingly used by Bahá'u'lláh as a stylistic instrument at the service of His revealed Word, are such literary devices as *idáfiy-i-isti'ári*, metaphorical genitive; *isti'áriḥ*, metaphor; trope, *tamthíl*, similitude, allegory, comprising the use of words describing lofty aspects of nature; *talmiḥ*, allusion, comprising quotations from the Qur'an, the Traditions and poems; the use of *mutirádifát*, synonymy. He Himself explained that He used all these devices “out of deference to the wont of men and after the manner of the friends” (*Seven Valleys* 26) so that His addressees may better understand His meanings.

As to *idáfiy-i-isti'ári*, a metaphorical genitive, its use in Bahá'u'lláh's writings has been extensively commented upon by Bausani and Christopher Buck, an expert on Islamic and religious studies.²⁴ In his explanation of the locution *varqá'u'l-irfán* (the nightingale of knowledge), Bausani observes that Western readers could be misled by the genitive used in its translation. He explains that “the preposition ‘of,’ which translates the Persian relational particle *-i*, is to be divested of the strictly and heavily possessive meaning typical of our languages” (*Saggi* 149). Therefore “the

²⁴ Cf. Bausani, “Some Aspects of the Bahá'í Expressive Style” 36-43, *Saggi* 147-62 and Buck, *Symbol and Secret*.

nightingale of knowledge” does not mean a nightingale whose *owner knowledge is*, ‘just as the house of the father is owned by the father’, but it means a nightingale *which is* knowledge, i.e., a nightingale which “emblematically represents on the physical level what knowledge is on the metaphysical level” (*Saggi* 151-2). If we take the locution *lawḥ-i-imkán* (Tablet of creation) (¶1) as an example of metaphorical genitive in this Tablet, it may be interpreted as a Tablet which is, or stands for, the creation. Buck points out that the metaphorical genitive used by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán is “an important exegetical device.” Bahá’u’lláh, he writes, “interprets a verse in a certain way, explicating a symbol by suggesting its referent. He then uses both symbol and referent together, bound grammatically by the Persian metaphorical genitive, to reinforce his exegesis.” According to Buck, while Bahá’u’lláh repeatedly uses the metaphorical genitive, He accustoms His readers to relate the symbol and the referent. Therefore “far from being merely ornate, his style renders the actual task of interpretation easier, as Bahá’u’lláh acclimates the reader to a metaphorical view of reality” (161).

As to *isti’áriḥ*, metaphor, trope, Bahá’u’lláh uses the beautiful metaphor to “take the celestial pearls out of the shell of silence (*la’alíy-i-raḥmání rá az šadaḥ-i-šamt bírún avarad*)” (¶20). He also writes:

What does the shadow understand of the One Who casteth it? And what does a handful of clay comprehend of a subtle heart? (*zill az muṣṣil chih idrák namáyad? va musḥtí gill az laṭífiy-i-dil chih fahm kunad?*) (¶18)

And again:

All the seas of the world and the rivers gushing therefrom flow forth from the eyes of this Youth, which have taken the semblance of a cloud and weep for their oppression (*jamí’-i-miyáh-i-‘álam va anhári-i-járíy-i-án az chashm-i-ghulám ast kih bi-**hi**’at-i-ghamám záhír shudih va bar mazlúmíyyat-i-khud girístih*). (¶35)

Among the metaphors may be listed also the words and locutions He uses to describe Himself. These words and locutions depict Him as the perfect Image of God, such as *naḥs-i-raḥmán*, “Self of the Merciful” (¶29); as the embodiment of the divine majesty, such as *sulṭán-i-dín*, “King of faith” (¶26); as the Source of the Divine light, such as *shams-i-‘izz-i-baqíyyih*, “Day Star of unfading glory” (cf. *Gleanings* 83:4,

124:3) (§30), *maṭlaʿ-i-quds-i-bāqí*, “Dayspring of eternal holiness” (§30), *nayir-i-áfáq*, “Day-Star of the world” (cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 112) (§22); as the Bearer of God’s message, such as *qalam-i-qidam*, “the Pen of the Ancient of Days” (cf. *Gleanings* 60:3) (§25); as the embodiment of God’s Beauty, *jamál-i-mubín*, “veilless Beauty” (cf. Persian Hidden Word # 9) (§1), *manẓar-i-akbar*, “Most Great Beauty” (cf. “Tablet of Ahmad,” in *Bahá’í Prayers* 210, literally the most great countenance) (§17), *jamál-i-quds-i-ma’naví*, “the Sacred and Divine Beauty” (§17), *jamál-i-qidam*, “Ancient Beauty” (§38); as the “Object of the adoration of all mankind” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 48), such as *ghulám*, “Youth” (§31, 33, 35), *ghulám-i-kan’ání*, “Canaanite Youth”, also an allusion to His mystical oneness with the beauteous Joseph) (§19), *ghulám-i-rawḥání*, “celestial Youth” (§31), and also *dúst*, “the Friend” (§36), Who loves each human being for her “own sake” (“Súriy-i-Haykal 199); and finally as the embodiment of perfect servitude to God and utter self-effacement, such as *‘abd*, “Servant” (§24, 32), *bandiy-i-fání*, “evanescent Servant” (cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 7) (§23), *bí-nishán*, “Traceless One” (cf. *Seven Valleys* 7) (§19), a servant who is therefore *mahjúr-i-miskín*, “poor and forsaken” (§20).

As to *tamthíl*, similitude, allegory, comprising the use of words describing lofty aspects of nature, in this vein Bahá’u’lláh alludes to the steadfastness of “a mountain (*jibal*)” (§3), the generosity of a “raining cloud (*abr-i-barándih*)” (§4), the fierceness of a “blazing fire (*shuʿliy-i-furúzandih*)” (§4) and the swiftness of a “flash (or lightening, *barq*)” (§12). He mentions “the birds of the air (*tuyúr-i-ṣaḥrá*)” and “the beasts of the field (*vuḥúsh-i-ghazá*)” as His only companions (§11) (cf. “Súriy-i-Haykal 96, 133), the “oceans (*al-abhár*),” the “waves (*al-ámwáj*),” and the “fruits (*al-aṭhmár*)” as having never borne what He bore (§14). He also alludes to “the immensity of the heavens (*faḍáy-i-khush*, cf. *Gleanings* 327, CLII, 6) of detachment” (§26).

As to *talmíḥ*, allusion, comprising quotations from the Qur’an, the Traditions and poems, He writes at least three Qur’an-like sentences: “Verily He guideth all things into a straight path” (cfr. Qur’an 2:142, 213) (§19); “Nor is that for God any great matter” (cf. Qur’an 14:20) (§20); and “soon you will bite your fingers’ ends” (cf. Qur’an 3:115; Kitáb-i-Íqán 77) (§31). The first two sentences are reminiscent of other Qur’anic verses often quoted by Bahá’u’lláh, such as “all is from God” (4:80; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 18), “There is no power or might but in God” (18:39;

cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 252), “Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us” (9:51; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 35, reportedly quoted by Mullá Husayn in Nabíl 337), God bestows “His grace on such of His servants as He pleaseth” (2:84; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 41), “Guided indeed is he whom God guideth; but for him whom He misleadeth, thou shalt by no means find a patron” (18:16; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, “Four Valleys” 53) and ‘He doeth what He willeth, ordaineth what He pleaseth’ (2:254, 5:1; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 116, LIX, 3). All these Qur’anic verses convey the idea of divine power and human powerlessness which is typical of the Bahá’í writings. They also denote the concept that divine grace enables human beings to return to God, in spite of their great weakness. As to “soon you will bite your fingers’ ends” (cf. Qur’an 3:115; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 77), it refers to a Qur’anic passage describing evil and deceitful people, who, the Qur’an writes, “when they meet you, they say, ‘We believe;’ but when they are apart, they bite their fingers’ ends at you, out of wrath” (3:15). Bahá'u'lláh seemingly uses this metaphor to describe regretting people. In the same category of *talmih*, allusion, may also fall the many allusions to personages of sacred history, such as Abraham, Joseph (Canaanite Youth, *ghulám-kan-‘ání*), Imám Husayn, or *Shimr* and *yá’júj* (the people of Gog), as well as to eschatological events, such as the Resurrection (*qiyámat*).

As to the use of *mutirádifát*, synonymy, Bahá'u'lláh describes Himself as “alone and friendless (*fardan va váhidan*)” (§10), His departure from Baghdad as “the mightiest testimony (*hujjatí*) and the most perfect and conclusive evidence (*burhání*)” (§16). Moreover, He mentions His “companions (*mu’ánis*)” and “associates (*mujalis*)” (§11).

Lawḥ-i- Maryam’s poetics and inner rhythm enable the reader to fully perceive and share the painful events narrated by Bahá'u'lláh and reveal the special love He gracefully nourished for a woman who was at His service in the dawn of His Revelation.

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