



The Love Relationship between God and Humanity: Reflections on Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words*

The *Hidden Words* is a collection of aphorisms, set out in no particular sequence, as if God Himself was speaking (the Islamic form of *ḥadīth-qudsī*,¹) 'to admonish and counsel' humanity.² These aphorisms suggest a way of inner growth, whereby every person may approach reunion with the Divine Self. At the same time they reflect upon the origin of humanity and human nature, the relationship between God and humanity and of each person with every other. They explore the meaning of human life, the comprehension of which is an incentive and the premise for those wishing to tread the path Bahá'u'lláh's words recommend. It may be owing to these characteristics that the *Hidden Words* have been described by Shoghi Effendi as a work of 'unsurpassed preeminence among the . . . ethical writings'³ of Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself presents His book as a synthesis of the teachings 'revealed unto the Prophets of old', now offered by Him 'as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God . . . and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue'. His educational and moral intention is evident: to encourage the readers to manifest their loyalty to God through 'deeds of stainless holiness' (P35⁴), a message representing the foundation of all revealed religions.

The language of the *Hidden Words* is not that of philosophical works but rather the inspired and metaphorical idiom of scripture. The reader is introduced into a mythical

In Moojan Momen (a cura di), *Scripture and Revelation*, (George Ronald, Oxford, 1997) 283-307.

¹ Those Islamic holy traditions in which God speaks in the first person.

² Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p.456.

³ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p.40.

⁴ Throughout this paper, the abbreviation 'P' will stand for the Persian *Hidden Words* and 'A' for the Arabic *Hidden Words*, each followed by the number of the Hidden Word.

Universe . . . that extends into the past and future of eternity, out into the macrocosm of the physical universe and into the microcosm of that most spiritual of all universes – our own hearts and minds.⁵

Here is a love-story, ‘the romance of all the ages – the Love of . . . the Creator and His creature . . . Only the final event of this love-story is lacking. God calls, and when His utterance is complete He pauses that man may answer, and waits – listening’.⁶

Although the *Hidden Words* repeatedly refer to human unfaithfulness, the reader emerges from its perusal with the feeling that it is possible for us to be faithful to that ancient Covenant and thus bring our heart’s love-story to a happy conclusion. Perhaps it is because it engenders this feeling of confidence, that it is a much-read book. And when these aphorisms are once again read with more concentrated attention, from those metaphors scattered concepts and ideas emerge in greater clarity. Those ideas, enlightened as they are by the light of spirit, seldom remain merely in the mind; more often they quicken the creative power of a deep love. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the *Hidden Words* have been recommended by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a text of meditation, inspiration and practical guidance⁷ and described by Shoghi Effendi as a ‘dynamic spiritual leaven cast into the life of the world for the reorientation of the minds of men, the edification of their souls and the rectification of their conduct’.⁸

The Origin and Position of man

God creates out of love. In the unapproachable station of His unknowable Oneness, wherein He alone is, He knows His love for that which comes into existence because He is a Creator and which, because it is created by Him, is His reflection (A3). And among His creatures He chooses one, the human being, for a special love: in us He reflects His whole ‘image’, to us He says: ‘Know thou, that I . . . have perfected through

⁵ Collins, ‘Sacred Mythology’, pp.11-12. This passage in the original paper refers to all the writings by Bahá’u’lláh.

⁶ Townshend, ‘*Hidden Words*’, p.274.

⁷ See, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, p.35.

⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p.140.

thee My bounty and have desired for thee that which I have desired for My Self' (A70).⁹ This image of God engraved within the individual, this divine trust entrusted to us, is the blessing and the challenge of our lives: it is our spiritual reality, our soul.

The soul,¹⁰ called also 'spirit'¹¹ and, with different shades of meaning, 'heart',¹² is described in its essential aspects. The soul is 'a breath of [the Divine] Spirit' (A19),¹³ and therefore it is immortal (A14). It is the 'throne' (A58) of God, His 'home' (A59), the 'habitation of [His] beauty and glory' (P27), the 'place of [His] revelation' (A59). It is a 'sacred city' (P33, 78), a 'Sinai', upon which 'the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed' (A63), a testimony of the words: 'My love is in thee' (A10); 'I have bountifully shed My favor upon thee' (A11); 'within thee have I placed the essence of My light' (A12), 'the pearls of My mysteries and the gems of My knowledge' (A69). And yet, the soul is also described as a 'candle . . . lighted by the hand of [His] power', that may be quenched by the 'winds of self and passion' (P32), as a 'bird . . . [that may stray] far from [its] eternal nest' (P2) – metaphors alluding not only to its capacity of soaring towards higher spheres, but also to its weakness and imperfection. Thus the soul is shown as a potential reality, like unto a 'tablet' (A71; P45),¹⁴ whereon angelic or satanic words may be written. It is a 'pure soil' (P33, 36, 78) that should be tiled, so that it may be changed into a 'meadow' (P45); a 'garden' (P3), that should be taken care of, so that 'the hyacinths of . . . knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green' (P33, 78; 36) and it may not become a place of thorns and withered blooms.

⁹ The Bible had already stated a similar concept in other words: 'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth' (Gen. 1:26).

¹⁰ *Nafs*, A4, A44, A57; *jan*, P1, P19, P40.

¹¹ *Rûh.*, A59, A71; P1.

¹² *Qalb*, A1, 2, 36, 54, 59, 63, 71; *dil*, P3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 16, 17, 26, 27, 31, 32, 33, 33, 36, 41, 42, 44, 56, 57, 68, 78.

¹³ See Gen. 1:26; Qur'ân 33:72.

¹⁴ 'Tablet' translates the Arabic *lawh*, which means a surface' (of stone, wood, metal, etc), on which something may be written.

Between the Two Worlds

Thus the soul is floating between two worlds: a material world and a spiritual world. The former is described as an inferior level of existence unworthy of our love. Sometimes its ephemeral nature is stressed. It is then defined as ‘that which perisheth’ (A23, P37), ‘a passing day’ (P39) and ‘this fleeting world’ (P41). But his transience is enwrapped in a ‘gay livery’ (P74), and thus this world is also a ‘sovereignty’ (P74), albeit ‘mortal and fleeting’ (A54), a beauty, ‘that [yet] must die’ (P14), a ‘mortal’ ‘cup’ (P61), that offers ‘evanescent water’ (P62). Other times it is described as a ‘cage’, a ‘prison’ (P39) where the soul is constrained in ‘fetters’ (P40), subjected to ‘self’ (P40), immersed ‘in the darkness of dust’ (P23), a prisoner ‘in the realms of desire’ and in ‘the regions of satanic fancy’ (P79).

And yet also such fleeting and cunning world has its value, because it offers to us a ‘chance’ (P21), that must be seized ‘for it will come to [us] no more’ (P40): the opportunity of demonstrating our faithfulness to the Covenant. If we will seize its challenge, we will be ‘freed from destruction and death, from toil and sin’ (P70) and will obtain the qualities of the spiritual or divine world.

This divine world is variously described – for its qualities: ‘everlasting’ and ‘eternal life’ (A63; P58); ‘realm of the infinite’ (P1), or ‘of spirit’ (prologue); or for its gifts: ‘court of holiness’ (A33), ‘heights of certainty’ (P9), or ‘reunion’ (A34, 61). It is a ‘highest paradise’ (A46), where we will be in a condition of ‘peace’, ‘rest’, ‘light’ and ‘holiness’ (A8, 41, 50, 68); the ‘city of eternity’ (P71).

We are thus presented as creatures endowed with a dual nature: material¹⁵ and spiritual.¹⁶ With regard to our material nature, we are described as creatures born

¹⁵ In our material nature, we are addressed as ‘son of the Earth’ (P6, 31), ‘of dust’ (P5, 11, 27, 36, 57, 62; cf. 39; 21, 68); ‘son of desire’ (P10, 22, 79; cf. P28; 45); ‘of passion’ (P55; cf. P50); ‘of negligence’ (cf. P16, 52, 75); ‘heedless ones’ (P59), ‘that are lying as dead on the couch of heedless-ness’ (P20); ‘son of worldliness’ (P70) or ‘bond slave of the world’ (P30); child ‘of fancy’ (P67) or ‘of vainglory’ (P74); ‘emigrants’ (P66)’ (in Arabic *muhájirán*, literally ‘emigrants’. The soul born from the divine worlds emigrated to the earthly world), and ‘fleeting shadow’ (P9); ‘rebellious ones’ (P65), and ‘My friend in word’ (P26).

¹⁶ In our spiritual nature, we are addressed as children ‘of the divine and invisible essence’ (A66); ‘son of being’ (A5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 26, 29, 31, 38, 43, 45, 53, 54, 55, 59) or ‘of the Supreme’ (A23, 32); ‘son of Him that stood by His own entity in the kingdom of His Self’ (A70) or ‘son of utterance’ (A10, 15); ‘of the Throne’ (A44) or ‘of spirit’ (1, 2, 8, 13, 18, 20, 22, 25, 28, 33, 34; P2, 15, 38); ‘son of man’ (A3, 4, 7, 14, 17, 21, 24, 27, 30, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 42, 46, 47, 48,

from an ephemeral world, whose fleetingness we share. We are bound to this world, and manifest this tie in the form of passion and desire (P34, 45, 68),¹⁷ which draw us towards behaviours that strengthen our ties with the material world and manifest the material side of our nature – negligence, heedlessness, rebellion, fancy, hypocrisy and vainglory. As to our spiritual nature we are described as spiritual beings, created by God Himself, ‘Divine and Invisible Essence’, through His ‘Being’, the Perfect ‘Man’, the Eternal ‘Adam’, Who speaks His ‘Utterance’ to humans. Upon us He lavishes His attributes, like beauty, light, justice, love, glory, bounty and such precious capacities as inner vision, a mind to know and ears to hear. Therefore God considers us not only as His children, but as friends, companions of His Throne, brothers in the path, dwellers in the highest paradise, the city of love. But all these bounties are potential. Their manifestation depends on us. While God made us to share in both the spiritual and the material worlds, He has also endowed us with instruments whereby we may know the two sides of reality: i.e. the ‘two visions’, useful both for looking to ‘the world’, and for recognizing ‘the hallowed beauty of the Beloved’ (P12). In addition, He conferred to us the capacity of loving, a capacity He left us free to orient towards either the ‘eternal, imperishable dominion’ or a ‘mortal and fleeting sovereignty’ (A54).

This dual nature makes humans somehow ambiguous. Although we are able to know the two worlds, and endowed with wings that enable us to ‘fly to realms of mystic holiness’, we often direct our steps towards ‘the regions of satanic fancy’ (P79). Our life, therefore, appears as wavering between a material world, to which

49, 50, 51, 52, 56, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 71; P61); the spiritual meaning of this title may be better understood in the light of the fact that Christ often called Himself ‘Son of Man’, as for example in Matt. 8:20), and ‘of Adam’ (P69); in the Bahá’í texts Adam is viewed as he first Manifestation of the prophetic cycle, and in this sense is the prototype of the Perfect Man, the Manifestation of God; ‘son of the wondrous vision’ (A19), or ‘man of two visions’ (P12; cf. P1); ‘son of love’ (P7), ‘of glory’ (P8), ‘of bounty’ (P29), ‘of light’ (A16), ‘of beauty’ (A67) ‘of justice’ (P4, 77); ‘My servant’ (P37, 40, 42, 72, 80, 81, 82) or ‘son of My handmaid’ (P41, 51, 58, 76, 78); ‘My son’ (P56, cf. P13), ‘My brother’ (P33; cf. P48), brother ‘in the path’ (P46); ‘friend’ (P3; cf. P14, 17, 43), ‘befriended stranger’ (P32), ‘companion of My throne’ (P44); dweller ‘in the highest paradise’ (P18; cf. P34) or ‘in the city of love’ (P23).

¹⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that in the holy scriptures of tradition ‘This lower nature in man is symbolized as Satan’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.287) and that therefore satan is only ‘the evil ego within us, not an evil personality outside’ (ibid.).

we are attracted because of desire and passion, and a spiritual world, towards which we are driven by our divine potentiality, almost a ‘spiritual instinct’,¹⁸ and by God Himself through His loving assistance.

The *Hidden Words* suggest a path whereby we may make our choice between the two worlds, the blessings and the challenge of our lives may be fully met and we may manifest, as thoughts and feelings, words and deeds, those precious qualities wherewith we are endowed, and suggest that thus the purpose of our creation will be fulfilled.

God’s Ancient Covenant

The journey of the human being begins at the moment of his creation. The *Hidden Words* describe this event through a metaphorical language of great charm. One of the aphorisms recalls our physical creation ‘Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of [God’s] command’ (P29). The human is here shown as a creature for whose training ‘every atom in existence and the essence of all created things’ (P29) were pre-ordained: a poetical reference, perhaps, to the fact that man is the fruit of evolution, which was preordained for his education? Anyhow, the purpose of this evolution and education is suggested on a higher plane of existence: God’s ‘everlasting dominion’ (P29; (cf. A70).

Another aphorism describes our spiritual creation. It is a ‘radiant morn’ ‘in the all-glorious paradise’; all people are gathered ‘beneath the shade of the tree of life’ (P19) in the presence of their Creator. It is then that God enters with us into a Covenant, that animates, sustains and guides the whole of human life,¹⁹ a Covenant here summarized in the form of ‘three most holy words’:

Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings (P19).

We are invited to be faithful to that Covenant which asks us to love God above anything else, to be submitted to His will and detached from the material world; we

¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.90.

¹⁹ cf. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, vol.1, p.72.

will thereby obtain ‘a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting’ (A1). But if we are not faithful to that Covenant, God pledges Himself ‘not to forgive any man’s injustice’ (P64).

The language of these aphorisms is that of Islamic mysticism. But here the metaphors are divested of any rigid symbolical stereotype and convey deep inner meanings. It is an intrinsic quality of human nature for people to be bound to their Creator by ties of complete dependence. It is the bounty of the Creator that He gave to these dependents the benefit of a tie of love. The Creator in His love for us reveals how best we may live that dependence and enjoy the bounties of that love: the path of faithfulness to a Covenant decreed by God Himself which will lead us towards the joy of reunion with Him. And since we are born and live in the world of matter, it is there that He realizes that Covenant, manifesting Himself in a human temple.

The *Hidden Words* merely hints at this renewal of the Covenant through successive Manifestations of God upon the earth, whereas our course in our relation with the Covenant is described in greater details: the starting point; the difficulties met along the way; our unfaithfulness; some of the more important clauses of the Covenant and of the glories of its final goal.

The Manifestation of God

The *Hidden Words* explain that God reveals His Word to us and bestows upon us plentiful spiritual bounties (cf. A70). The Word of God is often compared to water: a ‘wondrous fountain’ (A37), a ‘river of everlasting life’ (P37), ‘a dew-drop out of the fathomless oceans of [God’s] mercy’ (P61). As to the spiritual bounties, His ‘invisible bestowals’ (P29; cf. P11, A57), the allusions are many: ‘spirit of life’ (A4), ‘holiness²⁰ [and] power’ (A34); ‘of enlightenment’ (A63) and ‘mercy’ (P38); ‘breath of bounty’ (P46) and ‘divine favour’ (Conclusion): it is the ‘Holy Spirit’ (P58).²¹ Through these bounties the best human qualities can emerge, like ‘a finely tempered sword’ from concealment in ‘the darkness of its sheath’ (P72).

God, Who is forever ‘[v]eiled . . . in the ancient eternity of [His] essence’ (A3; cf. 65, 66), reveals His Word and bestows His gifts through an Intermediary, ‘the

²⁰ Also ‘frangrances of holiness’ (A70; cf. P46).

²¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes these Divine gifts as Holy Spirit – a ‘mediator between God and His creatures’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.145), that bestows upon them the divine light – and spirit of faith – ‘the power which makes the earthly man heavenly’ (ibid. p.144).

manifestation of [His] holiness' (P27). This 'Manifestation' abides, 'beneath the canopy of majesty behind the tabernacle of glory' (A45), in the 'court of holiness' (A33): the 'realms of celestial glory' (P28) and 'sanctity' (P38; cf. A6), 'the realms of the Placeless' (P28).

The Manifestation reveals whatever human beings may know about God and the spiritual worlds and thus he is 'the countenance of . . . God' (A24, 34), the 'Self' (A70²²) of God, 'the Most Great Name' (P53), 'the Most High' (P2, 8), 'the All-Glorious' (P22), the 'divine Assayer' (P25) who tests human beings. Being in His presence is the same as being 'in the holy Presence' (P59) of God.²³

The Manifestation of God conveys to us the divine Word: therefore He is given such titles as 'tongue of power and might' (Prologue; cf. A67), or 'tongue of the merciful' (P78); 'pen of might' (A67), 'of glory' (P7) or 'of the Lord of all names' (P52); 'dove of heaven' (P13) 'dove' or 'nightingale of holiness' (P23, 15), an allusion to the 'celestial melody' (P15) of His words that is the 'voice' (P15) of God Himself.

The Manifestation of God is also described, because of the abundance of his spiritual gifts, as 'Lord of wealth' (A53) and 'tree of effulgent glory' (A21; cf. A68, P49). In fact, we will find in Him everything we need to fulfil the purpose of our life. He is 'the most effulgent horizon' (P2), because the quickening light of the divine Sun shines from Him.

The Manifestation of God is 'the true Friend' who 'hath suffered for [man's] guidance countless affliction' (P52). Because of His love for us and His generosity, He is the 'Well-Beloved' (P1; cf. 12, 17, 22, 27, 45, 46, 62), the 'Adored One' (P35, 69), the 'Friend' (P26, 29, 43, 52), the 'chief of the monarchs of love' (P23).

Another line of symbols hints at the Manifestation of God as a manifestation of beauty (A3, 36, 39, 47, 50; P10, 11, 48, 63, 74). Thus He is called 'veilles Beauty' (P9); 'beauty of the immortal Being' (P77) or 'of the Beloved' (P12, 22, Conclusion; cf. P36); 'beauty of the rose' (P13). Finally, He is also described as a 'celestial Youth' (P23, 70), an 'immortal . . . divine Cup-bearer' (P58, 62) who proffers to humanity 'the cup of eternal life' (P58; cf. P62). The symbol, typical of Persian lyric poetry, is transparent: the Manifestation of God bestows His word and gifts for our

²² cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no.88, p.175.

²³ cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp.142-3.

spiritual growth, as the young cup-bearer offers the cup filled with inebriating wine for the physical joy of his guest.

We are urged to turn unto him (P9) and to ‘give ear . . . to that which hath been revealed by the pen of glory’ (P7; cf. A71, 38, 39, 40 etc.). In fact, the words of the Manifestation of God reveal to us the will of God, i.e. the clauses of His Covenant, worded as ‘statutes’ (A38), ‘commandments’ (A39) and ‘counsels’ (A39). They are the divine teachings, that reveal ‘myriads of hidden mysteries’ (P16); the ‘Cause’ (A34, 41, 42) of God, which is compared to a ‘beauteous robe’ (A37), a ‘garden’ (P18; cf. P1), a ‘celestial city’ (P17). And yet, albeit those words and gifts are great, they are ‘in accordance with [our] capacity and understanding, not with [God’s] state’ (A67).

If we conform to these teachings ‘the hyacinths of [Divine] knowledge and wisdom [will] spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of [our] heart’ (P33; 78) and ‘all wisdom [will] be [ours]’ (P62). Thus we will be able to overcome the suggestions of desire and passion, born of the material world, and to manifest the divine qualities of our soul.

However, if we want to receive these gifts, we should seek them through an act of love and free choice (A5), an act that requires an effort. In fact, because of ‘a mystery which none but the pure in heart can comprehend’, it is easier for us to understand ‘this fleeting world’ (P41) rather than the other one; and ‘the immortal sovereignty’ (P41) is not as evident to us as the ‘gay livery’ (P74) of the material world. Therefore it is easier for us to love the latter than the former. The challenge of earthly life is that, despite this, we will love the former.

Our Faithlessness to the Covenant

Although the clauses of the Covenant seem so clear and simple, we are repeatedly faithless to it (P17, 71) down the ages (P20); we often pass by the Manifestation of God without seeing Him (P16, 17), and even indulge in acts of persecution and cruelty against Him (P17, 23, 77, 79). But God is merciful and instead of getting angry for this impious and cruel ingratitude, manifests His solicitous fear that we may be lost and ‘return to water and clay’ (P13). He just reminds us that our actions are not hidden and that one day will come when the truth of all hearts will be manifested (P59, 67).

Manifold are the reasons for our faithlessness: our impurity that draws us to prefer ‘a mortal cup’ with its ‘foul dregs’ (P61, 62) and to ‘let . . . the defilement of the world eclipse [our] splendor’ (P73; cf. P45); ‘negligence’, the source of ‘vain . . . imaginings’ (P23), that like ‘veils’ (A63) make us believe the world to be a precious wealth (A56) and hold us back ‘within the pastures of desire and passion’ (P45), while forgetting (P29; cf. P79) the bounties of God; ‘heedlessness’ (P20, 30, 49), that deprives us ‘of the glory of the divine presence’ (P2), causes us to neglect the divine bounties (P29) and the Covenant, and prevents us from emerging resplendent ‘from behind the clouds’ (P73); ‘ease’ that induces us to busy ourselves with others than God (P28; cf. P39, 54); pride and rebellion that efface the remembrance of the Covenant ‘from the hearts, in such wise as no trace thereof remaineth’ (P71), and thus fell ‘the tree of [our] hope’ (P21).

The Obstacles of Our Journey

The same reasons for our faithlessness remain as obstacles to our spiritual journey. Impurity, idle fancies, negligence, heedlessness, ease, apathy and rebellion bind us to the world in a despairing remoteness from God. Envy prevents us from attaining the ‘everlasting dominion’ and inhaling the ‘sweet savours of holiness breathing from [His] kingdom of sanctity’ (P6); malice forbids us from entering the ‘divine court of holiness’ (P42); ‘idle contentions’ (P46) and ‘covetousness’ (P50) keep us in a condition of affliction and deprivation; hypocrisy excludes us from the hosts of God’s true lovers (A28); slander and back-biting defile our tongues, ‘designed for the mention’ of God’ (P66; cf. A26, 27).

These qualities belong to our material nature. They are the result of our attachment to the self and the world, a sign demonstrating that we are not faithful to the Covenant, because we have set our love on the self and the world, rather than on God.

In the *Hidden Words* the self is described as a ‘prison’ (P40) and as a ‘fire’ (P66), a reality that can lead us to behaviours we should avoid (A26, 27). It is associated with ‘the fiery charger of passion’, that we, in our rebellion, spur ‘into perilous ways that lead unto destruction’ (P65) and that as a contrary wind may quench the ‘candle of [our] heart’ that was ‘lighted with the hand of [God’s] power’ (P32); it is associated with ‘worldly desire’ (P37; cf. P79), that as a ‘sheath’ prevents our worth to ‘be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world’ (P72).

Other obstacles we meet on our spiritual path depend from the circumstances of life. These are God's tests, as tribulations that nonetheless 'the true lover yearneth for' (A49), because they enable us to demonstrate our love for God; or as wealth' (A55), that can easily draw us far from God.

Bad friends are also described as obstacles, because they exercise an evil influence upon the soul, so much so that we are advised to guard ourselves 'from the strangers amidst [God's] servants and from the ungodly amongst [His] people' (A69).

The Consequences of Faithlessness

Those who are faithless to the Covenant are condemned to remain 'far' from God (A35; P2, 21), deprived of His love (A5) and sometimes even accursed by Him (A26, 27). Caught within 'the prison of self' (P40), they will live a life deprived of 'peace' (A8) and 'rest' (A40). They will 'thirst for evermore' (A37), lost in a vain search after appeasement (A15, 17). Victims of illusion (A56), sunk into the 'baser stages of doubt' (P9), they will be 'sorely afflicted' (P46), and will fall a prey of 'poverty' (A13), spiritual abasement (A22) and 'boundless shame' (P21). The 'shades of utter loss' (P13) will envelop them. Scourged by 'weariness [and] trouble' (A63), 'toil and sin' (P70), they will be overcome by 'destruction' (P65), perdition and spiritual death (A9), or, in an eschatological sense, by an 'unforeseen calamity . . . [a] grievous retribution' (P63).

And yet although we, who know our own self better than we know others (P66), are conscious of our limitation, we wrongly believe that 'secrets of hearts are hidden' (P59) and that our faithlessness will remain unpunished. But God knows all secrets and in His grace decided not to breathe them (P28, 60). He will call upon us 'to give account for [our] deeds' (A31): individually, at the end of our days when 'death, unheralded, shall come upon' (A31) us and the secrets of our hearts will be manifested and God, careless of the gay liveries of the world, will gather us with all humanity 'beneath the one-coloured covering of the dust' (P74); collectively, at the end of time when 'the radiant dawn breaketh above the horizon of eternal holiness' (P67) and perversity and injustice (P63, 64) will be punished.

The Clauses of the Covenant

The Covenant is the kernel of the ethical teachings set forth in the *Hidden Words*. And yet it is not a cold list of precepts or a lengthy description of abstract casuistries.

It is the voice of a wise and loving Father, Who reminds His children of His eternal teachings and, in His love, touches the innermost chords of their hearts. Is it because His counsels are the most precious part of all religious traditions and were thus absorbed by all of us through the most cherished experiences of childhood? Or is it the ‘reed’²⁴ of the soul which, perceiving the breezes wafting from the rushes where it was born and whence it was pulled up, becomes ‘at-one-ed’²⁵ with the melody of His words and vibrates?

Love of God

The God of the *Hidden Words* desires ‘to be loved alone and above all that is’ (A8). He claims to this love (A20), because of His bounties unto us: ‘the fragrances of holiness’ and His ‘word’ (A70). ‘Love Me, that I may love thee,’ He says. ‘If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee’ (A5). It is a two-way love relationship, as that between the sun and the tree or mother and son, which even in nature ‘is the basis for growth’.²⁶ Neither the world of matter nor the human self, in their ephemerality, are worthy of our love: only God is worthy of being loved and such a love, which is the essence of human faithfulness to the divine Covenant, is an indispensable prerequisite whereby the required bounties of God may be received and an inner transformation, which is the purpose of human life, may be achieved. The results are so beneficent that this love is described as a ‘treasure’ to be cherished ‘even as [one’s] very sight and life’ (P32). Anything else will offer only fleeting joys and will finally bring us bitterness and delusion (A8, 9, 15, 17, 37, 40; P4).

Love for the Manifestation of God

And yet, since God is ‘veiled . . . in the ancient eternity of [His] essence’ (A3), we cannot orient our love directly to Him. The object of our love is He wherein God chooses to reveal Himself: His Manifestation. This love for the Manifestation of God is not just a feeling, or a thought; it is a continuous quest for the nearness to God (A34, 35) and for God’s ‘pleasure’ (A7), pursued through the observance of His

²⁴ Rumi, in Nicholson, *Selected Poems*, p.5.

²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.328.

²⁶ Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, vol.2, p.233.

statutes for His love's sake (A38). To attain this nearness and pleasure we should 'Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart' (A1).

The 'pure . . . heart'

The first quality required from the heart is that it be 'pure', i.e. sanctified and cleansed from anything except God (A7, 58, 59). In fact the heart is the centre of man's love, and therefore God wants it for Himself (P27): 'Thy heart is My home; sanctify it for My descent . . .' (A59). It is impossible indeed 'that friend and foe should abide in one heart' (P26) or for His 'will and the will of another than [Him to] dwell together in one heart' (P31; cf. P27). Therefore Bahá'u'lláh admonishes: 'Cast out . . . the stranger, that the Friend may enter His home' (P26). This condition is called 'detachment' (A68).

The first requirement of detachment is detachment from the self: 'If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself' (A7); 'There is no peace for thee save by renouncing thyself' (A8); 'Renounce thyself and . . . abide in the realm of celestial sanctity' (P38). Detachment from the self implies manifold attitudes.

Firstly it implies detachment from 'idle fancies' (A62, 63; cf. P45), i.e. ideas, accumulated in the course of time, that, since they are at variance with reality, are defined as prejudices. Sometimes we consider them to be 'learning' (P11), because they are part of tradition. But it is this kind of 'learning' that hinders us from recognizing the Manifestation of God, when He appears to us, bereft of worldly power, enwrapped in the glory of the spirit' (P10, 12).²⁷ And thus the *Hidden Words* admonish: 'empty thyself of all learning, save the knowledge of Me, that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness' (P11).²⁸

²⁷ The meeting with the Manifestation of God is not intended only as a physical event, possible only to those who are alive in His lifetime but also means meeting Him through his words and teachings.

²⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that detachment from the self requires also sanctification from 'inordinate desires, . . . selfish purposes and the promptings of . . . human self'; it implies for man that he should seek out 'the holy breathings of the spirit', follow 'the yearnings of [the] higher self' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p.207), and also 'that he should not seek out anything whatever for his own self in this swiftly-passing life, but that he should cut the self away, that is, he should yield up the self and all its concerns on the field of martyrdom, at the time of the coming of the Lord' (ibid. p.207).

A further requirement of detachment is detachment from the world (P14, 15, 16, 54). This detachment implies detachment from wealth, that is fleeting (A52, 53) and dangerous for the spirit (P53; cf. A55, 56; P11, 55). And yet wealth is condemned only when it becomes a barrier between man and God (P53). The poverty recommended in the *Hidden Words* is a poverty ‘in all save God’ (P51) consisting in a complete submission to the Will of God.

Detachment from the world implies also detachment from the ‘Kingdom of Names’,²⁹ i.e. from ‘vainglory’ (P47); as well as ‘fortitude under My decree and patience under my trials’ (A48), here presented as ‘the sign of love’ (ibid.; cf. A49, 50, 51; P44). Fortitude and patience can go as far as martyrdom (A45; 46, 47), intended not only in its literal meaning, but also as a life wholly devoted to the service of the Cause of spirit. Without these qualities the path of detachment cannot be tread, because the required moral strength whereby the tests of life may be met is lacking.

Detachment from the self and from the world does not imply life to be abhorred, but only it to be considered in its real meaning: a school wherein the soul may learn how to know, in the practice of daily living, the qualities of the spiritual world wherewith it is potentially endowed (P29, A3). Therefore detachment is not asceticism, renunciation, indifference, but only the choice of God as the supreme object of love. The *Hidden Words* proffer a very clear admonishment: ‘The basest of men are they that yield no fruit on earth’ (P81; cf. P82), ‘Let deeds, not words, be your adorning’ (P5). These words leave no place for doubts: he who loves God should learn how to live a life of both detachment, commitment and service, for His love’s sake.

Detachment may be obtained by cleansing ‘the heart with the burnish of the spirit’ and hastening ‘to the court of the Most High’ (P8). The rough surface of the heart will not reflect the splendour of the Sun of Reality, until the burnish of the continuous effort of observing the laws (the requirement for admission into the ‘court of the Most High’) will have released it from the fetters and impurities of earthly life and made it a polished and shining surface.³⁰

Of great help for those of us who are struggling for detachment are an introspection that may lead us to ‘bring [ourselves] to account each day’ (A31), remembrance of God, considered as the ‘healer of all . . . ills’ (P32) and

²⁹ cf. Taherzadeh, *Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh*, p.25.

³⁰ cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp.21-2.

‘companionship of the righteous’ (P3) that ‘cleanseth the rust from off the heart’ (P56) and ‘doth quicken and illumine the hearts of the dead’ (P58)’ (P57).

The ‘pure heart’ is characterized by other qualities as well: justice (A2), trust in God (A8), faithfulness (P1), contentment (P50), obedience (A18, 38, 39), humbleness before God (A24, 42).

The ‘kindly . . . heart’: Loving Humankind

The Covenant provides that we will attain the good-pleasure of God through ‘the pleasure of His creatures’ (P43). To attain this pleasure the qualities of a ‘kindly . . . heart’ are required:³¹ love (P3), justice (A2, 38), honesty, loyalty and sincerity (A2, 28), humbleness in front of one’s fellow-men (A25, 68; P5, 47, 48), courtesy and kindness (A1), harmony (P5), forbearance (P48), compassion and mercy (A27, 30; P44, 49, 66), charity and generosity (A30, 57; P49, 54). These qualities of kindness contribute to form that which is commonly defined as a ‘good character’. Those who have a good character are both loving and lovable.³² They love all people around them and all those who meet them can easily love them. These qualities are therefore very precious in human relationship, whose perfection is realized in the oneness of humankind. The oneness of humankind, the pivot of the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith, is offered in the *Hidden Words* both as the starting point of humanity, which was created ‘all from one same substance’ (A68), and as an end point of its evolution, the highest expression of collective spirituality that can be achieved on the earth, and therefore the purpose of the whole world of creation. No wonder that the *Hidden Words* sternly condemn back-biting, slander (A26, 27; P44, 66), envy (P6, 42) and malice (P42), important factors of disunity.

The ‘radiant . . . heart’: Creativity

‘Rejoice in the gladness of thine heart, that thou mayest be worthy to meet Me and to mirror forth My beauty’ (A36): this gladness is born from being content with the will of God, i.e. from ‘submission to [His] command and humbleness before [His]

³¹ The famous verses by Dante are here recalled: ‘Love, that in gentle heart so quickly wakes’ (‘Inferno’, canto 5, v.100) and: ‘Love and the gentle heart are one same thing’ (*Vita Nova*, cap. 20).

³² Lovable is defined as ‘gifted with traits and qualities that attract affection’ (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, v. ‘lovable’, p.1340).

Face' (A40), and from thankfulness to Him' (A70), a thankfulness described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only as a 'verbal thanksgiving which is confined to a mere utterance of gratitude', but also as 'a cordial giving of thanks from the heart', that expresses itself in 'spiritual susceptibilities' or better yet 'in praiseworthy actions':

self-sacrificing, loving the servants of God, forfeiting even life for them, showing kindness to all the creatures . . . [being] severed from the world, attracted to the Kingdom of Abhá, the face radiant, the tongue eloquent, the ear attentive, striving day and night to attain the good pleasure of God.³³

This contentment and gratitude should be manifested when in receipt of the great gifts of God (A70) and also under the trials of life, which are often sent down upon us so that our faithfulness to the Covenant may be tested: 'If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure?' (A50)

Other qualities of a radiant heart are knowledge (P11, 33) and self-knowledge (A13); wisdom (P36) and holiness (P8); an attitude of prayer and meditation (A16, 31; P8, 32); unity (A68) and commitment to one's work (P80); happiness (P44) and the capacity of enjoying any legitimate pleasure that may be offered by life (P82); serenity in the face of death (A14, 32) and the beneficial influence such a heart has on the others' (P56, 58). A heart endowed with such gifts is a versatile instrument whereby the Cause of God may be established and divulged in the world (A41, 42, 43).

The Goal of the Path: Spirituality

Faithfulness to the Covenant implies a way of life, shaped by a persistent effort of doing whatever the Manifestation may require (A71). Through this effort we write the divine word 'upon the tablet of [our] spirit' (A71), and thus we acquire qualities which are also requirements for success. It is a process of transformation, which proceeds slowly and then accelerates, whereby we are raised from a world of dust to

³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.236.

the luminous lands of a celestial realm.³⁴ It is a gradual (P7) transformation, described as ‘path of holiness’ (P8) and ‘detachment’ (Conclusion).

During this process the soul is filled ‘with the spirit of life’; through the assistance of the ‘Holy Spirit’ (P58), its inner eye is opened’ (A44, P12), the ‘pearls of [Divine] mysteries and the gems of . . . knowledge’ (A69), God has enshrined within it, become manifest. Thus the soul becomes ‘an eternal light and an immortal spirit’ (A51), obtains ‘the gem of Divine virtue’ (Prologue) and attains unto that ‘sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting’ (A1) for which it was created.

As divine qualities are gradually acquired and perfected, self and passion, fear and uncertainty grow less in the heart, and peace, joy, certitude and love grow stronger. Our physical, intellectual and spiritual potentialities are actualized with growing harmony and diminishing conflicts. The heart, pure in its determination of expressing its love for God in the form of deeds, attains not only kindliness – the capacity of actively loving the others – but also such radiance as bestows upon it the light of a lamp of guidance. We become one of those righteous described by Bahá’u’lláh: ‘Wouldst thou seek the grace of the Holy Spirit, enter into fellowship with the righteous, for . . . even as the true morn [he] doth quicken and illumine the hearts of the dead’ (P58).

Spiritual growth is thus neither a barren ascetic exercise, nor a narcissistic process of self-gratification but a path leading, through service, to the progress of humankind. A balance is realized between the private and the public domain, in a reciprocity of influences and in a balance between the two spheres, thus described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

Every soul who lives according [these] teachings . . . is free from the ailments and indispositions which prevail throughout the world of humanity; otherwise, selfish disorders, intellectual maladies, sicknesses, imperfections and vices will surround him, and he will not receive the life-giving bounties of God.

. . . The essential principles of [these] . . . healing remedies are the knowledge and love of God, severance from all save God, turning our

³⁴ This concept is thoroughly explained in Hatcher, ‘The Concept of Spirituality’, *Bahá’í Studies*, No. 11.

faces in sincerity towards the Kingdom of God, implicit faith, firmness and fidelity, loving-kindness toward all creatures and the acquisition of the divine virtues indicated for the human world. These are the fundamental principle of progress, civilization, international peace and the unity of mankind . . . the secret of everlasting health, the remedy and healing for man.³⁵

This is the ‘joy of reunion’ (A61), the attainment unto the eternity and unity of God (A64), His majesty and grandeur (A65). This is paradise: ‘My love . . . reunion with Me’ (A6), thus explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

. . . nearness to God is possible through devotion to him, through entrance into the Kingdom and service to humanity; it is attained by unity with mankind and through loving-kindness to all; it is dependent upon investigation of truth, acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, service in the Cause of universal peace and personal sanctification. In a word nearness to God necessitates sacrifice of self, severance and the giving up of all to Him. Nearness is likeness.³⁶

God within us

In the course of this process of transformation real self-knowledge is attained, as explained in the words: ‘Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting’ (A13). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá comments:

This is the statement to which . . . Christ, referred His apostles in the Gospel, saying, ‘The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in you.’ [Jn 14:20].

. . . when the hearts are purified and through divine education and heavenly teachings become the manifestators of infinite perfections, they are like clear mirrors, and the Sun of Truth will reflect with might,

³⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.204-5.

³⁶ *ibid.* p.148.

power and omnipotence in such a mirror, and to such an extent that whatever is brought before it is illumined and ignited.³⁷

Thus at the end of our path we discover God within ourselves. Did He not engrave His image upon us? (A10, 11, 12, 19, 36, 64)

In this condition, finally we may be said to be faithful to and mindful of the Covenant; it is the realization of the words: ‘Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you’ (P19). Anyone who has attained unto such a goal has reached the goal of faithfulness. The Bab wrote that ‘God hath . . . taken upon Himself the task of ensuring . . . the domination of one thousand of the faithful over all the peoples and kindreds of the earth’.³⁸ Upon such foundation the future World Order will be erected and the highest human hopes for peace and justice will be fulfilled.

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³⁷ *Lights of Guidance*, no.1635, pp.488-9.

³⁸ The Báb, *Selections*, p.153.

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