

SOME NOTES ON BAHĀ'U'LLĀH'S GRADUALLY EVOLVING CLAIMS OF THE ADRIANOPOLE / EDIRNE PERIOD.

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From the Bahā'ī theological perspective Bahā'u'llāh, as the "Divine Universal Manifestation" (*al-mazhar al-kullī al-illāhī*)¹, has, from an eternity of eternities in his pre-existent Reality, been a Messenger of God "endowed with constancy" (Qur'ān 46:35). During his temporal ministry (1852-1892 C.E.) the transcendent station he claimed became gradually and only imperfectly realized by his earthly contemporaries. He often communicated his claims in a highly mystical language; frequently in allusive terms rooted in past Semitic scripture. The numerous Arabic and Persian Tablets (*alwāh*: in excess of 15,000 extant) he revealed, span a 40 year period (1852-1892 C.E.) and contain multifaceted claims which have been understood (and sometimes misunderstood) in many different ways.² Bahā'ī theophanology, in other words, has numerous facets: some expressive of a "high theophanology", others suggestive of humanity or "servitude" -- not mutually exclusive in the light of the Bahā'ī doctrine of the Manifestation of God (*mazhar-i illāhī*). It is the *alwāh* themselves which must constitute the primary source for the understanding of the progressive unfolding of Bahā'u'llāh's claims.³ A proportion of them contain autobiographical statements sometimes dwelling upon the nature and history of his claims.

The nature of the gradually evolving claims of Bahā'u'llāh has, to date, hardly been researched at all. Few of the thousands of his revelations have been read through or

¹ See Shoghi Effendi, *Centennial Tablet* (*Lawh-i Qarn* np. nd. Naw Rūz 101 Badī'): 1.

² See Khazeh Fananapazir, *A Tablet of Mīrzā Husayn 'Alī Bahā'u'llāh to Jamāl-i Burūjirdī: A Full Provisional Translation* in BSB 5:1-2 (January 1991), pp.4-12.

³ I fully support the observations made above by Juan Cole, and draw attention to a few relevant scriptural passages noted some years ago in the course of researching my [uncompleted] doctoral thesis *Some Aspects of Isrā'īliyyāt and the Emergence of the Bābī-Bahā'ī Interpretation of the Bible*. Selected material derived from an unpublished paper, *After the Qā'im: the gradually unfolding claims of Mīrzā Husayn 'Alī Bahā'u'llāh*, is also included.

convincingly dated by scholars anxious to clarify the so-called early "messianic secret"⁴ of his claims. That there was such a "messianic secret" is directly or indirectly stated in a number of primary "revelatory" (*alwāh*) sources. Only a small proportion of Bahā'u'llāh's Tablets of the Iraq and of the early Edirne periods have been published; a mere handful read by scholars interested in clarifying the nature of the evolution towards explicit apotheosis or Bahā'u'llāh's claim to (subordinate) Divinity.

Throughout his ministry (1852-1892) Bahā'u'llāh expressed his claims in a multitude of ways and in accordance with the varying "capacity" of his diverse questioners. One cannot always thoroughly trace a merely straightforward evolution of Bahā'u'llāh's claims from (to simplify) "servitude" to "Divinity". In some early (pre-1866) Tablets, "late" claims tending to apotheosis seem to be expressed or presupposed. Then, in certain late (post-1866) Tablets, diverse expressions of the "early" claim to "servitude" are also present.

In attempting to understand Bahā'u'llāh's revelations their dating and *Sitz im Leben* should, as far as is possible, be taken into account. Something of the Islamo-Bābī theological 'universe of discourse' also should be borne in mind -- such as the 'extravagant' claims of certain Sufis. It would be wise to bear in mind that the perspective and standpoint of the contemporary reader of the *alwāh*, to a greater or lesser extent, colours the picture. From the theological point of view, also, it should not be forgotten that certain of Bahā'u'llāh's claims are clarified, and authoritatively interpreted for Bahā'īs, by Abdu'l-Bahā' and Shoghi Effendi.

⁴ The term "messianic secret" is of fairly recent origin -- deriving from the title of the 1901 classic work of the German New Testament scholar Wilhelm Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis* Eng. Trans., 'The Messianic Secret'. It sums up the fact that "Jesus is frequently portrayed in the Gospels, especially in Mark, as trying to maintain an element of secrecy about himself and his work." (C.M. Tuckett art., *Messianic Secret* in R.J. Coggins & J.L. Houlden Eds., *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* [SCM Press London 1990] pp.445-6.) Attempts to work out a coherent Christology have been bedeviled by the disparate nature of New Testament presentations/assessments of Jesus' person and claims. As "revolutionaries" aiming to create a "new heaven and a new earth" the Manifestations of God choose, at times, to maintain a "messianic secret" lest their purpose and life, as well as the lives of their followers, be threatened or terminated. Muḥammad was at first reluctant to preach. The Bāb, on occasion, seems to have practised *taqiyya*. Bahā'u'llāh kept silent about his claims for fear of creating disunity and in the light of the limited spiritual capacity of his contemporaries.

Both the Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh have explicitly confirmed a "messianic secret" or the gradually evolving nature of their claims. Relative to the Bāb, the classic expression of this occurs in the Persian *Dalā'il-i Sab'a* , where at one point we read:

"Consider the grace of the Promised One in so extending His mercy to the people of Islām that He might bring them salvation, how He whose station is that of the first of all created things and the manifestation of the verse 'Verily, I am God,' revealed Himself as the Bāb of the Qā'im of the family of Muḥammad, and in His first book commanded observance of the laws of the Qur'ān so that men might not be disturbed by a new Book and a new Cause."⁵

In the first major work of the Bāb, the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (mid. 1844) a wide variety of claims are stated or presupposed, including "servitude" and "divinity". After his pilgrimage to Mecca the matter becomes even more complex in the light of episodes of outward 'dissimulation' (*taqiyya* ?). In his post-1848 writings, claims to Divinity, Lordship and the like are very frequent.

In certain of his Tablets Bahā'u'llāh has fully affirmed the Bāb's gradual unfolding of his claims. This, often in the light of the progressively unfolding expression of his own move from claiming servitude, or no station at all, to claiming Prophethood and ultimately (subordinate) Divinity.

During the early to mid-1850's a good many Bābīs made exalted claims for themselves and directly or indirectly challenged the by-no-means universally acknowledged leadership role of Mīrzā Yahyā.⁶ Bahā'u'llāh however, right up until the end of the Iraq period,

⁵ *Dalā'il-i Sab'a* p.29 (np. nd. [Azalī Edition]) trans. Denis MacEoin, *Early Shaykhī Reactions to the Bāb and his Claims* p.18 in M. Momen (Ed.), *Studies in Bābī & Bahā'ī History* Vol.1 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press 1982).

⁶ For some details see Denis MacEoin, *Divisions and Authority Claims in Bābism (1850-1866)* in *Studia Iranica* 18(1989):93-129.

supported his half-brother and spoke of himself as a leading Bābī. He, to quote Shoghi Effendi, "... appeared in the guise of ... one of the foremost disciples of the Bāb ..."⁷

In a number of his writings of the Iraq period Bahā'u'llāh speaks of himself as naught but a servant of God and was viewed by some Bābīs as the "return" of the Imām Husayn. His early, semi-secret claim to Husayniyya would not necessarily have been viewed as extraordinary, in the light of the plethora of divine and exalted ranks claimed by leading Bābīs (e.g. Quddūs). The Bāb himself had accorded "divinity" or exalted stations upon a veritable pleroma of true believers. Many leading Bābīs were reckoned to be the "return" of the various Imāms or "people of the House".

At one point in the early *Tablet of All Food (Lawh-i Kull al-Ta'ām*, late 1853 -> early 1854 C.E.) Bahā'u'llāh states: "... I have claimed naught but servitude to God, the True One ..."⁸ Similar statements are to be found in many other pre-1866 Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh, including the *Sūrat al-Kifāya (c.1855?)*, *Lawh-i Madīnat al-Tawhīd (c.1857?)*, *Ṣahīfa-yi Shattīyya (c.1858?)* and in other untitled letters. In one untitled letter of Bahā'u'llāh we read: "Say: O People! This is the servant of God. And He is naught save the like of anyone among you."⁹

Such clear declarations of servitude did not, however, eclipse Bahā'u'llāh's claiming, when appropriate, divine inspiration and speaking of himself in very exalted terms. It was one thing to claim "Divinity" and "Godhood" -- after the fashion of a good many God-intoxicated Sufis -- and another to explicitly claim independent Prophethood or to be the promised one of the Bayān, *man yuzhiruhu'llāh*, capable of abrogating the Bayān and inaugurating a new religious dispensation. The Bābī and later Bahā'ī barber and poet, Ustad Muhammad 'Alī Salmānī, who visited Baghdad in 1862 observed that

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (BPT, Wilmette Illinois 1987): 128.

⁸ See S. Lambden, *A Tablet of Mīrzā Husayn 'Alī Bahā'u'llāh of the Early Iraq Period: The Tablet of All Food*, BSB 3:1 (June 1984 pp.4-67) p.36

⁹ This untitled letter, almost certainly dating from the Iraq period is contained in INBA Xerox Coll. Vol.32 (pp.39-42) p.41.

Bahā'u'llāh "... would say whatever the Manifestation of God [independent Prophet] would say, but in all he uttered there was no "I am He! ...".¹⁰

In order to explain and legitimate his own years of acting as a leading Bābī (mid. 1840's --> early 1860's) but now claiming exalted Prophethood or Divinity, there exists an important passage in Bahā'u'llāh's *Sūra of the Commencement ['Opening'] (Sūrat al-Fath)*, which is probably to be dated around the early Adrianople period (?). Towards the beginning of this Arabic Tablet addressed to Fath al-A'zam, Bahā'u'llāh claims to be the Remembrance (*al-dhikr*) and states that he divulges nothing save what is in accordance with the recipients' capacity. God lies behind and determines, through His command, the nature of Bahā'u'llāh's claims in direct accordance with a determined measure, "... lest the inmost hearts of such as believe in the unity of God be shattered". Referring to the earlier Bābī situation, Bahā'u'llāh continues:

"So recollect, O people! the moment when there came unto you the Revealer of the Bayān (*munzil al-bayān* [the Bāb]) with wondrous, holy verses. He then said, 'I am the Gate of Knowledge (*bāb al-'ilm*) and whosoever is convinced of the truth of My Claim (*haqqī*) in addition to that (*fūq dhalika* : surpassing that station), hath assuredly invented lies about Me and acquireth great sin within himself'. Then [later] He said, 'I am the Qā'im, the True One (*al-qā'im al-haqq*) whose manifestation you were promised in mighty, noble Scrolls. This, verily, is assuredly [the Reality of] Muhammad, the Messenger of God (*rasūl allāh*), just as thou hast heard and witnessed in the tablets of God (*alwāh allāh*), the King, the Ruler'. He [subsequently] said, 'I am the Primordial Point (*nuqtat al-awwaliyya*)'. And when the beings of a number of predisposed souls were refined, thereupon the veils were torn asunder and there rose up from the Dawning-Place of Holiness [the Bāb's

¹⁰ See 'Ustād Muḥammad 'Alī-yi Salmānī (tr. M. Gail), *My Memories of Bahā'u'llāh* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press 1982) p. 15.

claim], 'I verily am God, no God is there except Me, thy Lord and the Lord of all the worlds'. And [He said], 'I, verily, from the beginning which hath no beginning, was a Divinity (*illāh^{an}*), One, Single, Unique...I [the divine, primordial Bāb], verily, sent the prophets (*al-nabiyyīn*) and the Messengers (*al-mursalīn*) from an eternity of eternities ...'

Then gaze upon Me [Bahā'u'llāh], the Soul of God (*nafs allāh*)...By God, O people! I [Bahā'u'llāh] did not desire any Cause (*amr^{an}*) for Myself and followed all the Manifestations of old. I supported the Cause of God on all levels (*fī kullī sha'n*) during the days when faces were concealed out of fear of the oppressors. I humbled Myself before every soul in the Bayān [all Bābīs] and lowered the wing of submission (*jannāh al-taslīm*) before every worthy believer."¹¹

This passage begins by echoing the words of the Bāb quoted above from the *Dalā'il-i Sab'a*. Bahā'u'llāh then seems to state that he had no desire to take over leadership of the Bābī community (cf. *Kitāb-i Īqān* trans. Shoghi Effendi [BPT: London 1961]: 159-161) but was faithful to the past Messengers of God, the ongoing religion of God. He remained a Bābī in all respects, even when such Bābīs as his own half-brother, Mīrzā Yahyā, were cowering in isolated *taqiyya*. Before his upright fellow religionists he manifested an humble submissiveness. He clearly states how he cared for, taught and elevated Ṣubḥ-i Azal. Paragraphs such as this are scattered throughout Bahā'u'llāh's early -- and some later -- writings.¹²

¹¹ Translated from an unpublished, [unnumbered] manuscript, mostly containing Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh of the Adrianople/ Edirne period originating in the Iran National Bahā'ī archives dated 1294 A.H. / 1877-8 C.E. pp.77-8.

¹² Another example dating from the Adrianople period, is the following passage from the *Lawḥ-i Khalīl* published in Ishrāq Khāvarī's *Mā'ida-yi Āsmānī* (BPT: Tehran 127 Badī° Vol.8:171ff.) and dating from the Adrianople period: "... in the beginning of the year 60 [1260 A.H./1844 CE.]. He [the Bāb] was manifested, at the beginning of His appearance, in the garment of Gatehood (*bi-qamīs al-bābiyya*) ... then He replaced it with the garment of Sanctity (*bi-qamīs al-wilāya*) ... [later] ... he revealed himself unto them with the name of Lordship (*bi-ism al-rubūbiyya*) and cried out, "I verily, I am God, no God is there except Him ..." Following these lines are paragraphs in which Bahā'u'llāh dwells on the nature of the diverse claims of the Manifestation of God, with a view to legitimating and clarifying aspects of his own evolving claims. Shoghi Effendi has translated a portion of this Tablet, printed in

Bahā'u'llāh's claim to servitude along with hints of far greater claims persisted right up until the end of the Iraq period. Such poetic compositions as the *Rashh-i 'Amā'* and *al-Qasīda al-Warqā'iyya* contain allusions to Bahā'u'llāh's future assumption of leadership and independent Prophethood. It was not, however, until the latter part of the Iraq period extending well into the Adrianople/Edirne period (roughly between 1861 and 1866) that Bahā'u'llāh more clearly intimated his most elevated claims -- in for example his *Halih ... Yā Bishārat* (c. 1862-3) and *Lawh-i Mallāh al-Quds* (1863) then more openly (though still initially semi-secretly) in major Tablets of the next decade. Different Bābī and other communities became aware of Bahā'u'llāh's elevated claims at varying post-Bahgdad times.

THE RIDWĀN DECLARATION

Bahā'u'llāh made known certain of his claims to a small and select group of Bābīs who visited him during the period of his sojourn in the garden of Najīb Paṣhā on the Tigris bank near Baghdad; the subsequently styled "Garden of Ridwān [Paradise]". Here he encamped for a twelve-day period between April 22nd and May 3rd 1863, immediately before moving on to Constantinople. The exact nature of his claims during this period are obscure. Was it to be "Him Whom God shall make manifest" (*man yuzhiruhu'llāh*), the expected Bābī messiah and inaugurator of the "greater resurrection"? Obscure also is the 'Ridwān reaction' of Mīrzā Yahyā (if he was present and heard them?) to Bahā'u'llāh's claims as well as the identity of those to whom the claims were intimated / openly communicated. A little light is, however, shed upon them in various primary scriptural sources (*alwāh*) of this period and subsequent years.

In one of the letters/Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh-Khādimu'llāh of the West Galilean ['Akkā'] period (1868-1892; the text which I sum up is dated 14th Muharram 1304 A.H./1886-7 C.E.) Bahā'u'llāh mentions that he gave utterance to three "words" during the twelve days of the

on the nature of the diverse claims of the Manifestation of God, with a view to legitimating and clarifying aspects of his own evolving claims. Shoghi Effendi has translated a portion of this Tablet, printed in *Gleanings*... XXXIII [= MA 8:172-3]. On Bahā'u'llāh's early relationship with Yahyā see, for some further details, S. Lambden, *A Tablet of .. Bahā'u'llāh of the Early Iraq Period: The Tablet of All Food*, BSB 3:1.

Ridwān period. He states, in other words, that he -:

- [1] abrogated the Islāmo-Bābī law of (the permissibility) of offensive "holy War" (jihād) advocating a pacifist attitude to the propagation of Bābism;
 - [2] asserted that no independent Messenger or Manifestation of God would appear (presumably after him) for at least a millennium (1,000 [presumably solar] years); and
 - [3] claimed that through his declarative utterance creation had been renewed (or the like).¹³
- Each of these three "words" or teachings finds explicit mention in Bahā'u'llāh's later writings and imply his assumption of independent Prophethood and hence leadership of the Bābī community. It is not the case however, that all the Bābīs who visited Bahā'u'llāh in the Najabiyya Garden before his departure to Constantinople, became aware that he claimed independent Prophethood. It took at least another 5-10 years for this to become known among a majority of the Bābī communities of Iran and Iraq.

Apart from *Sūrat Allāh*¹⁴, in which Bahā'u'llāh openly ranks himself among the exalted Prophets, it is the *Sūrat al-Sabr*, written on April 22nd 1863 (= the first day of the Ridwān period) which contains some paragraphs of great interest in connection with the transition in his claims of this period. Though this epistle contains something of a futurist eschatology as well a claim to servitude on the part of Bahā'u'llāh, we read at one point:

"O Bahā' of the Spirit! Do not conceal thyself in these veils. Manifest thyself through the power of God then break the seal of "I am the Spirit" which hath, for an eternity of eternities, been sealed with the seal of preservation. This to the end that the perfumed breezes of this primordial "I am" might blow upon all created things, perchance contingent reality might be enlivened

¹³ I summarize here the Persian text of the Tablet of Bahā'u'llāh-Khādīmu'llāh published in INBA Xerox Coll. Vol. 44: 225. See also Taherzadeh *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh* Vol. I (Oxford: George Ronald 1974) : 278-80 , summing up part of a Tablet of Bahā'u'llāh-Khādīmu'llāh to Āqā Muhammad Ridā.

¹⁴ This work is an Arabic epistle of the very late Iraq period (? early--> mid 1863 ?) addressed to an as yet unidentified Bābī named 'Alī after Nabīl (= Muḥammad 'Alī). In it Bahā'u'llāh refers to his desire to quit Iraq, dwells on his sufferings, underlines his Divine status and power of revelation. Among other things, he also refers to his withdrawal to Sulaymaniyya (1854-6). In terms of his power of revelation he includes himself among the great Messengers; mentioning Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Bāb. Addressing the Bābīs he considers rejection of him tantamount to rejection of all the Messengers of God.

through the Breath of the All-Merciful and rise up for the sake of the Cause (amr, command) on the Day in which the Spirit appeareth from the direction of the Dawn." ¹⁵

Other passages of interest cannot be discussed in detail here, neither can the implications of the various *alwāh* written in celebration of the Ridwān period be commented upon.¹⁶ It must suffice to note that between April 22nd and May 2nd 1863 Bahā'u'llāh orally and in writing indicated his assumption of exalted Prophethood and absolute leadership of the Bābī community. In subsequent years Bahā'īs came to view the year 1863 as the year of Bahā'u'llāh's "declaration" of his prophetic mission; a year prophetically intimated in the Bible, the Qur'ān and Bābī scripture. His more widespread, open and explicit "declaration" however came in 1866, following his "final rupture" with his hostile half-brother Mīrzā Yahyā.

¹⁵ *Ayyām-i Tis'a* (Rep. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press 1981) pp. 300-301.

¹⁶ Bahā'u'llāh wrote a number of *alwāh* in celebration and commemoration of the Ridwān period. See for example, *Ayyām-i Tis'a* 346f; 306f.