

Course of Bahá'í Symbology

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English version by Patricio J. Cernadas

Second Lesson

The Prophet, the Point and the Storeys of the World

The Bahá'í sacred writings refer to the Prophet as “the Primordial Point”, the beginning of a New Creation, an original manifestation. The Báb is the ‘Nuqtiyiulá’ (Primordial Point), the one which establishes the measurement assigned to each and every thing”²

This symbolism has equivalent forms in different religions. For example, the Bindu Point in Hinduism, the Pearl in Buddhism, the Supreme Point in Hebrew Mysticism, the Mustard seed in Cristianism and the Point of the letter Ba in Islamism.

The Point is the universal symbol of origin. It stands for the border of the abstraction process. All manifestation o appearance occurs in time and space on a given point.

It is possible to symbolize any type of entity as a point from which that entity has evolved. The Koran says that “the Man should realize that he has been created out of a monad”³, in other words, out of an elementary component such as a point.

In a metaphorical way, the atom, the seed, the seminal drop, the letter and the primordial sound are forms related to the different levels of Reality;

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² *Selección de Escritos del Báb*. Compilado por el Departamento de Investigación de la Casa Universal de Justicia. (http://bahai-library.com/bab_seleccion_escritos) (English translation: PJC)

³ Korán, 80:19. (English Translation: PJC)

they represent the origin and the limits of vegetables, animals, humans, linguistics and sounds respectively.

In his analysis of the symbolical structures of the religious spirit, the historian of religions Mircea Eliade has outlined an Ontology of the Point. According to the Rumanian thinker, the religious fact implies the distinction between a sacred space and a profane one from a central point:

“The manifestation of the sacred creates the world ontologically. (...) It unravels a fixed point –the centre. (...) The discovery or projection from a fixed point –the centre- is equivalent to the creation of the world.”⁴

We should take into account that the religious symbology of the Point participates in a structure whose components have their own key in the Prophet. Let us analyze some of the multiple symbolical structures in which the Point, associated with other symbols, represents the Prophet.

The Point may be equivalent to the singularity that gives rise to the cosmos as well as the cusp on “The Mountain of God”, “the Fountain” or “the Door”, for the sake of bringing up some of the motifs. This equivalence has examples in the texts of Báb:

“The visage of God contemplates himself on the personae of the Primordial Point

“I am the truly Door of God and his Will enables me to make you drink from the crystal waters of his Revelation, the waters that flow from the incorruptible fountain located on the Sacred Mountain.”⁵

We find a similar reaction to Christian symbolism. As Jesus Christ declares in the Godspell:

“I am the Door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.”⁶ (and) (...) the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”⁷

⁴Mircea Eliade, *Ocultismo, Brujería y Modas Culturales*, pág. 110, Editorial Marymar, Argentina, 1977. (English translation: PJC)

⁵*Selección de Escritos del Báb*(http://bahai-library.com/bab_seleccion_escritos) (English translation: PJC)

⁶ John, 10:9 King James version.

The vision of the greatest Catholic poet in which nine angelical choruses, “heaven and all nature”⁸, revolve around a Sacred Point has an counterpart in the writings of Báb:

“Throughout the Will of God, the angels and the souls descend in an orderly fashion towards this Door and revolve around this Focal Point in a wide circle.”⁹



Giovanni di Paolo - Dante and Beatrice contemplate the Divine Visage



⁷Juan, 4:14 King James version

⁸ Dante, *Divina Comedia*, *Paraíso*, XIII, 11 y XXVIII, 41 (English translation: PJC)

⁹*Selección de Escritos del Báb*. (http://bahai-library.com/bab_seleccion_escritos) (English translation: PJC)

The Greatest Name - Ex Libris from Kitab-i-Iqan cover

The Point and God the Geometrician

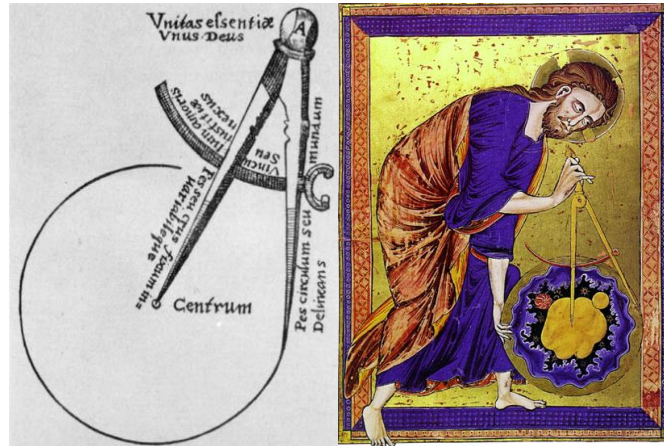
In the Book of Wisdom, King Solomon declares that God has arranged “everything according to quantity, weight and measurement”.

This theological-cosmological conception considers the Divinity as a creator or maker of the Universe by means of Mathematics (numbers and geometric forms). It is a religious structure, a fundamental and invariable one. The changes introduced by the progressive revelation may straighten out some of its aspects without affecting its essence.

This structure was rendered on brilliant philosophical terms by Plato, who stated that the demiurge “decorated Chaos with figures and numbers”. The Platonic cosmology formulated a universe whose fundamental characteristic was geometry: “God the Geometrician.”

The Platonic demiurge has also been associated with the figure of the prophet in some theologies such as the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim.

According to this conception, the symbolism of the divine act of creation is linked to a geometrical tool which Plato called “divine”: the compass. The Catholic iconography illustrates this idea superbly with the following idea: Christ, the Verb, draws a circle representing the Universe while leaning on its central point.



The Divine Creation, the Point and the Compass

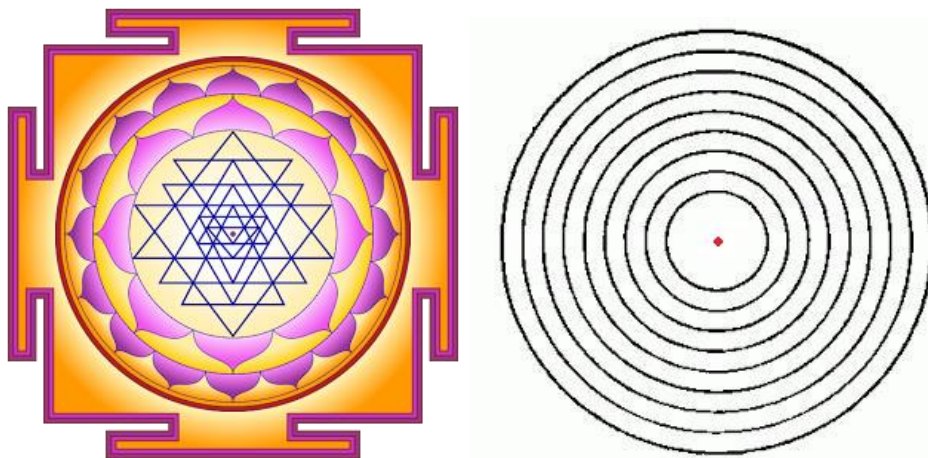
In different traditions, the cosmology of the point has a similar iconographic form, a design known as Mandala (in sanscrit). This drawing which usually involves an external circle and two or more concentric circles within a square, stand for the image of the Universe as the apparition of the Divine.

Some Mandalas have the appearance of a garden whose flower patterns, especially the lotus, intersperse with architectural structures. The Bahá'ís can relate these designs to the symbolic structure formed by the buildings and the gardens of Mount Carmel, which represent a Mandala in three spatial dimensions.

The practice of meditation on the Mandala by Hinduism and Buddhism implies a progress towards its central point. This is equivalent to moving around a temple or the ascent upon the storeys of the Sacred Mountain. The point represents the holiest system, the “Centre of the World” through which an axis runs along, the Axis Mundi. The believer ascends during their pilgrimage along this axis as a staircase, which has a limited number of steps or storeys: nineteen according to Bahá'í Symbolology.

The most famous Mandala is *Sri Yantra*, employed by the Hinduism. It is made up of nine triangles; five with a vertex heading down and the remaining four with a vertex heading upward. These two groups represent the feminine and the masculine aspects of the divine manifestation. The whole is articulated around the Point Bindu, the centre and origin of all manifestations.

Since it is made up of nine triangles, it is denominated Sri Yantra, “wheel of the nine triangles.”



The Nine triangles of Sri Yantra – The Nine circles in the Bahá'í World

This well-known design symbolizes the Divine Creative Power and the phases of its manifestation, that is to say, the Creation of the Universe. The Creation starts with the upcoming of a point which has forked away from a strike of lightning and radiates a primordial triangle whose vortex stand for nine points identified as Sanscrit syllables stemming from the origin.

The structure of Sri Yantra can seem foreign to the Bahá'í Symbology, but they are both related to each other. We can establish some equivalence between the point and the nine triangles of the Mandala and the nine storeys and the primordial point that make up the Bahá'í symbolic geography. The feminine and masculine aspects of the manifestation, represented by the nine (4 + 5) triangles, also show likeness to the symbolic structure of the Twin Prophets, the Báb y Bahá'u'lláh, who the Hand of the Cause Abu'l-Qásim Faizí' link to the Edenic couple of Adam and Eve, the representation of the two complementary principles, one active and the other passive, both of them necessary to all manifestations.



Hindu Primal Triangle

Triangle of El Báb Sanctuary

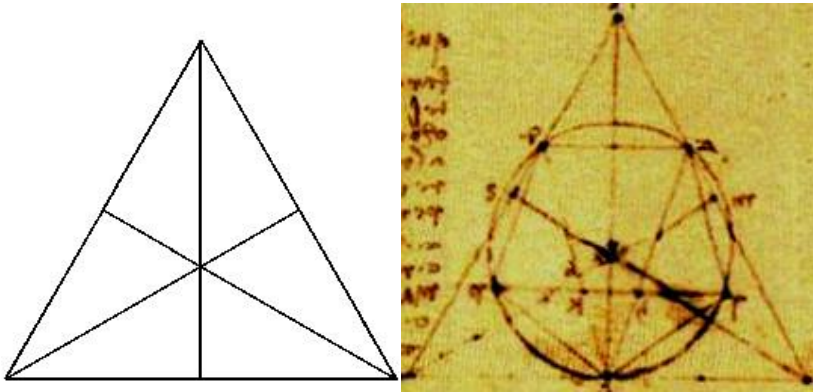
The equilateral triangle is one of the typical figures in Platonic and Neoplatonic symbologies. Divided by its perpendicular bisectors in six equal right triangles, it was presented by Plato as the fundamental structure of his conception of Matter.

The historian of Science, S. Sambursky, has stated that:

“For Plato the triangles seem to have been the mathematical elements of the incorporeal surfaces which intuitively handle the corporeal processes of matter”¹⁰

This triangle appears on many occasions in *The Atlantic Codex*” by Leonardo Da Vinci in tessellations, rotations and translations which intuitively anticipate the Modern Algebraic Group Theory.

¹⁰ S. Sambursky, *El mundo físico a fines de la antigüedad*. Pág. 85, Editorial Eudeba, Buenos Aires, 1970. (English translation: PJC)



Triangle of Timeus by Plato Triangle from Atlantic Codex by Leonardo Da Vinci

In Muslim Theosophy the descending movement from the emanation is realized by letter ternaries and triangles. The first ternary composed of the letters *Alif*, *Ba* and *Jim* act as a cusp for new triangles which dynamically generate all the Manifestation.

The counterpart to this primal triangle are the eighteen triangles adorning the dome of Bab Sanctuary. The relation is even more evident if we consider that the Bindu point is also called “the pearl” and that this one comes up in the centre of the triangles in the temple.

The motif of the Sea Shell and the Pearl as its treasure and divine message is a symbol shared by various religions.

The system of Mount Carmel is clearly related to this symbol. Shoghi Effendi, the designer of the system, calls Bab’s Mausoleum “the Shell which contains the Pearl.”¹¹

When referring to Bahá’u’lláh, The Guardian points out that “His Precious Cause is beyond all dreams and human hopes; inside His Own Arks He is the Guardian of the Priceless Pearl which the world has craved since its very creation (...)”¹²

Bahá’u’lláh also employs the symbol of the pearl and the Shell:

¹¹RúhíyyihRabbani, *La perla inapreciable*, Pág. 293, Editorial Bahá’í, Argentina,1973

¹²Shoghi Effendi, *Dios (English translation: PJC)*

(http://www.bibliotecabahai.com/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=182)

“(...) Move towards His Sacred Court on the side of His Mighty Ocean so that you can receive the Pearls of Knowledge and Wisdom as a revelation that God has deposited in the Shell of His glowing Heart (...)”¹³



The Lamb (Christ) and the Shell Mosque - Mihrab shell-shaped

Jean Chevalier points out that the Pearl is particularly rich in symbolic value in Persia. It is a symbol of revelation and knowledge; the Pearl is related to the acquaintance with Divinity. According to Ahl-I Haqq cosmology:

“In the beginning of existence there is no creature but the Supreme Truth. It dwells in the Pearl and its essence is occult.”¹⁴

The great mystic poets have employed the symbol of the Pearl. Rumi identifies the pearl with the Prophet; Saadi mentions the raindrop, the sky seed that becomes a pearl; Hafez refers to the pearl that the Shell of Time and Space cannot hold inside; Attār symbolizes the mystic longing of “becoming a pearl”; “being a pearl” is to be exempt from duality; being One means to mirror all divine names and attributes reflecting the archetypical world.

¹³Bahá'u'lláh, *La Proclamación de Bahá'u'lláh a los Reyes y Dirigentes del Mundo* (http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_proclamacion_de_bahauallah) (English translation: PJC)

¹⁴Jean Chevalier –Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de Símbolos*, Pág. 815, Ed. Herder, Barcelona, 1999. (English translation: PJC)

According to Hindu iconography, the god Vishnu shows a Shell in which the primordial seed is contained: the manifestation of the Divine Verb in the three kingdoms.

The Pearl also has a counterpart in Buddhist symbology. Buddha refers the parable of a poor man who ignores that he has a treasure, a priceless pearl hidden in his attire. The Chinese monk Gensha (IX Century) describes the universe as a “brilliant pearl”; Master Dogen (XIII Century) tells about Gensha, who was very fond of fishing and caught the golden fish Satori. The ocean, according to this Japanese Zen monk, has endless virtues: “For the fishes and for the gods it is like a pearl necklace”; Dogen also claims that “a glowing pearl is the Name of the Universe”¹⁵.



Buddha and the Vishnu Pearl

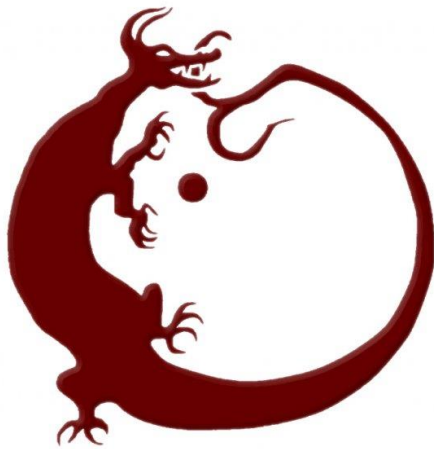


The Shell

On occasions, the Fish replaces the Sea Shell; the mythical Dragon-Fish Ho with an open mouth showing a Pearl that is hailed as the “Door” leading to Buddha.

The emperor pulls away the Pearl from the Dragon to get hold of its power. Thus comes the maxim quoted by Mao Tse Tung: “The Pearl of the Dragon is beyond discussion.”

¹⁵TaisenDeshimaru, *Zen verdadero: Introducción al Shobogenzo*, Pág. 212, Editorial Kairós, 2001, España. (English translation: PJC)



The Pearl of the Dragon

According to a Chinese legend, the shells that welcome thunder in their bosom conceive pearls, which are thus called “thunder balls.” A similar image appears in Christianity: Saint John Damascene (VII century) mentions the divine streak of lightening coming from the sky to find lodging in the Shell, in Mary, the Lord’s Mother; the Priceless Pearl is born from her¹⁶.

A parable in the Godspell compares the Pearl to the Kingdom of God and the Book of the Apocalypse depicts the gates of the Celestial Jerusalem as pearls.

“The twelve gates were twelve pearls; each and every gate was a pearl”¹⁷.

The *Physiologus*, which was written in Paleo-Christian language, refers that there is a Shell on the sea, its valves stand for the Old and the New Testament, and Jesus Christ is contained in the pearl.

The Hymn to the Pearl in the Acts of Thomas, an apocryphal writing related to the New Testament dating back to II and IV centuries, clearly relates the motifs of the hero, the dragon and the pearl:

¹⁶Juan Damasceno, *Homilías Cristológicas y Marianas*, Pág. 123, Editorial Ciudad Nueva, España. 1996. (English translation: PJC)

¹⁷Apocalipsis, 21:9-27. (English translation: PJC)

“If you come down from Egypt and get hold of the Unique Pearl which is at the bottom of the sea, in the lodge of the serpent that makes foam ...”¹⁸

This Gnostic book refers to the Pearl as the manifestation of God in the cosmos.

According to the Bhágavad-Gitâ:

“All the things in myself are threaded like pearls of necklace”¹⁹

The last quotation is meaningful if we consider that the eighteen pearls of the dome in Báb Sanctuary and the one hundred and forty-four (cipher related to Celestial Jerusalem) on the barrel vault are virtually threaded into the Necklace of the Beloved.

The motifs of the Gate, the Shell and the Pearl definitively form the same symbolic structure in which Buddha, Christ, Mahoma and Báb take up the centre.

The Point and the Alphabetical Symbolism

For the Jewish Mystics the letters of the alphabet and the associated numbers are the elements of the Creation and the Revelation; and the Name of God, the Tetragrammaton, stands for the totality of the things manifested.

The Muslim Mystics states a similar idea about the Arabian alphabet: the Divinity manifests and generates all existing things through lettering structures; the most important is that of nineteen letters comprising the Bizmal, an invocation at the beginning of the Koran.

Al-sîmiyâ’, the traditional “science of the letters and the numbers” from the Arabian alphabet, is in a central position in Muslim Thought and Spirituality. Like the Hebrew Kabbalah and other traditions, it delves into the Names of God and their relationship with the Man and the Universe.

¹⁸Francisco García Bazán, *Gnosis: La esencia del dualismo gnóstico*, pág. 308. Ediciones Castañeda, Argentina, 1978. (English translation: PJC)

¹⁹Bhágavad-Gitâ, VII,7. (English translation: PJC)

The Science of Letters and the Numbers seek the Greatest Name or the Occult Name, the One-Hundredth Name containing the totality of Names, Numbers and Forms. This Divine Name is also represented by a Mandala.



Arabian Calligraphy –Ninety-nine names of God - Tibetan Calligraphic Mandala



Bahá'í Dome and the Divine Name

Now I will deal with the first two letters related to the Muslim Cosmology, which are associated with the cosmology stemming from some Bahá'ís sacred texts.

According to the Science of Letters, God did not create the world with the first letter (*Alif*). He used the second (*Ba*) instead. *Ba* represents the beginning of the Creation realized by this letter and inside itself. All beings manifest between these two complementary ends of *Ba*.

Like every manifestation, the Creation implies duality. This is the reason why *Ba* is at the beginning and its diacritic is written with the Divine Calamus, God's Quill, which is pictured by the first letter *Alif*.

A quill or calamus touches a piece of paper on a point from which all letters and words come from.

The Point of *Ba* symbolizes the Ineffable Essence and it is traditionally called "Hidden Treasure", and sometimes "Pearl".

According to a tradition, at the beginning God created a point of light, looked at it and drew *Alif*. What does *Alif* stand for? The relationship between the Creative Power and the Creation. It is illustrated by the vertical line *Alif*, the axis of Creation. *Ba* is the first of all beings; this letter is the start of the Creation and from here the Divine Verb unfolds.

The first two letters symbolize the meeting of the vertical/active (*Alif*) and the horizontal/passive (*Ba*) on a point. They represent Adam, Eve and the multiplicity of beings and names from this seminal point.



Letter Alif

Letter Ba

Creation

In the Bayán the Báb says:

*"(...) The Alif (the Godspell) and whoever lingered on it gyrated around the words of Muhammad, God's Apostle"*²⁰.

In his "Commentary to the Disconnected Letters in the Koran", Bahá'u'lláh mentions the letter "A" (*Alif*) as the herald of "The Greatest Name (*Allah*)."²¹

²⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *Dispensación de Bahá'u'lláh* (English translation: PJC) (http://bahai-library.com/shoghieffendi_dispensacion_de_bahauallah)

A well-known hádíth claims that everything is in the Koran. This sacred book is contained in the nineteen letters comprising its first invocation, the Bismal. The parts of the Bismal are contained in the letter Ba, and this one is in turn contained in its diacritic. The quill or calamus touches a piece of paper on a point from which all letters and words unfold. Therefore, all books are contained in this point.

In another famous hádíth, the Iman Alí stated that *“I am the Point of Ba”*. This hidden point represents the Prophet, the link between the divine world and the human world (the axis of the worlds goes through it).

Siyyid Kázim, Báb’s forerunner, mentions the diacritic of the Ba and its relation with the letter "H". This represents the name Bahá as a component of number 9 (B=2 + A=1 + H=5 + A=1) and its bearer Bahá’u’lláh.

The H starts with the Arabian word *Hú* (He). The word *huwiyyat* means the essential identity of God, which the Guardian translates as “the Divine Essence”.

In “The Four Valleys” Bahá'u'lláh affirms:

*“Any sublime pieces of evidence and wonderful allusions, herein mentioned, do no relate to anything but the Unique Letter, the Unique Point”*²².

Bahá’u’lláh also refers to the process of Creation as the movement of a point generator of lines:

“You should know that God, may He be praised and glorified, took a line, cut it in two pieces, and rotating one on to the other made the Universe

²¹Alison Marshall, *Tablet of the 'Light Verse' (Lawh-i-Áyiy-i-Núr)*, also known as *Commentary on the Disconnected Letters: What on earth is a disconnected letter? Baha'u'llah's commentary* (http://bahai-library.com/marshall_disconnected_letters)

²² Bahá'u'lláh, *Los Siete Valles y Los Cuatro Valles*, Capítulo 4. (http://bahai-library.com/bahaullah_siete_valles)

out of them. However, the line is formed out of the Point when it is shifted. You should therefore grasp this meaning."²³.

Far from the religious field, the current cosmological theory of the Big Bang points out that the universe originated on a primal point or singularity which in turn generated time and space. This implies a Metaphysics of the Point.

The physicist Paul Davis has remarked:

*"This singularity or point represents the fundamental incognoscibility of science(...) Some cosmologists believe that the universe emerged from a pure singularity. If this was the case, a singularity would be the door communicating the natural with the supernatural"*²⁴.

Final reflection

Although it is true that our reach of the Bahá'í symbology of the Point exceeds our grasp, we should fathom that it could refer to a cosmology, a metaphysics and logics that the philosophy, the science and art will eventually formulate.

²³Bahá'u'lláh, Tabla sin publicar. Traducción al inglés con carácter provisional de Keven Brown (versión en castellano de E. J. F.)

²⁴Paul Davis, *Dios y la Nueva Física*, Pág. 67, Biblioteca Científica Salvat, Barcelona, 1944.