

John the Baptist and Baha'i Prophetic Categories: An Atypical Paradigm

by Jack McLean

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Abstract

This comparative Jewish-Christian-Islamic-Baha'i study examines the prophetic station (maqām) of the largely forgotten prophet John the Baptist. I submit that although the Baha'i writings and their authoritative interpretations do not justify the inclusion of John the Baptist among the 'independent prophets' or divine manifestations 'endowed with constancy', nonetheless, the evidence suggests that the forerunner of Christ is an anomalous figure who does not neatly fit the classification of minor prophet. The Baptist manifests some attributes that characterize the independent manifestations/major prophets, but he does not satisfy all the criteria. His paradigm indicates that within the category of minor prophet distinctions must be made. For the reasons advanced below, John the Baptist deserves to rank at the high point of the dependent/minor prophets. In light of Baha'u'llah's reference to John's extant followers, this study also provides a synopsis of the history of present-day Sabaeen-Mandaean (Subbā) Baptists in Iraq.

Sources

This analysis takes place in light of five sources: (1) the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37–100 CE) and Jewish prophecy; (2) gospel and extra-canonical sources; (3) the Quran, hadith, and Muslim exegetes; (4) Sabaeen-Mandaean studies and; (5) Baha'i sources that include the writings of Baha'u'llah, Shoghi Effendi's interpretations, letters of the Universal House of Justice, and the observations of scholars.¹

The Manifestations of God/Major Prophets

Before analyzing John the Baptist's prophetic status, it would be in order to frame the question with a passing consideration of the concept of divine manifestation. The introductory sentence of Juan Ricardo Cole's 1982 oft-quoted instructive study 'The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings' qualifies as a foundational absolute: 'At the center of all teachings of the Bahá'í Faith stands the figure of the manifestation of God.'² The 'manifestation of God/divine

¹ I am grateful to the Universal House of Justice and its Research Department for providing me with some original sources and translations, for previous correspondence on this topic, and for their comments that helped to determine the basic orientation of this article. I would like to thank Todd Lawson, associate professor in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto, who made available to the author some Islamic literature on Yahya and related questions. Professor Lawson acted as friendly listener and good-will advisor. However, any errors that may be found in this article are entirely my own. I would like to thank Dr Gerald Hanks, currently of Port Williams, Nova Scotia, whose own paper on John the Baptist sparked my initial interest in this topic some 35 years ago. Thanks also to Danish scholar Daniel Grolin who clarified some points about the Baptist and his opponents, the Sadducees and Pharisees.

² Juan Ricardo I. Cole, 'The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings', *Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 9, Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982, 1.

manifestation' (*mazhar-i-ilahi*), a pivotal phrase that has antecedents in Shiah Islam and the Babi religion,³ is Baha'u'llah's technical term that tends to refer to the major prophet or divine messenger. It has the advantage of transcending some of the unresolved complexities in the problematic Islamic *nabi-rasul* distinction, but it has not served to 'overcome' or resolve the various nuances involved in the words *prophet* and *messenger*, which continue to be used in Baha'i scripture.

Shoghi Effendi has referred to Baha'u'llah's revelation as a 'supreme Theophany',⁴ reformulated by Cole more generally as 'theophanology',⁵ a Baha'i-specific term for prophetology. Cole leaves Shoghi Effendi's 'supreme Theophany' uncited and unexplained, but it is entirely pertinent to his subject. The theophanic phenomenon, when it derives from prophetic divine revelation, applies to all manifestations of God who exert a cosmic, regenerative, spiritual dynamic on creation.⁶ While this is not the place to enlarge on the multifaceted role of the manifestations of God in the teleological movement of human history, as progenitors of civilizations, or as motive forces in the progressive development of the world's religions, suffice to say that as Divine Logos their importance cannot be overestimated.

While no definitive, exclusive list of the divine manifestations (major prophets) 'endowed with constancy' (*ulu'l-'azm*)⁷ has been formulated by the three central figures (the Bab, Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha), in my view the Baha'i writings and their authorized interpretations include at least the following thirteen figures as independent prophets: Adam, Noah, Hud, Salih, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah.⁸ Those major prophets whose names are still associated with the existing world religions are nine: Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah.

Shoghi Effendi, the former head and Guardian of the Baha'i faith, gave one list of major prophets. However, we have no way of knowing whether or not Shoghi Effendi intended this list

³ Denis MacEoin writes that in Shiism the 'manifestation of God' originally referred to the names and attributes of God appearing in the 'Reality of Muhammad' and in the Imams. For the Bab, the hidden reality of God is manifested in the Primal Will, which reveals itself successively in the outer world through the being of the prophet. MacEoin, 'Mazhar', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., ed. P. Bearman et al., Brill, 2012. Brill Online. <http://www.brillonline.nl> (accessed 12 March 2012)

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 1st pocket-sized edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 97.

⁵ Cole, Concept 2.

⁶ The most outstanding expression of this cosmic influence is Baha'u'llah's superlative eulogy of Jesus. He writes that the 'deepest wisdom', 'profoundest learning', 'the arts', 'the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers', the healing of 'perversity', 'ignorance', waywardness and unchastity are all are 'but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit'. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 1st pocket-size edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990, 84.

⁷ Cole points out that the phrase is originally quranic (46:34) but of obscure meaning (Concept 12). In his main doctrinal work, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Baha'u'llah makes two references to the prophets 'endowed with constancy'. He associates them with the revelation of a holy book, indicating that the revelation of scripture is the main criterion distinguishing the major from the minor prophets, referred to as 'legislating prophets' in Shiism. The major prophets also abrogate previous laws and legislate new ones. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, pocket edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) 216, 220.

⁸ Adam ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) 47, 161. In Islam, Adam is both a prophet and the father of humanity. The Baha'i faith follows this usage and honours Adam by naming the first prophetic cycle after him. He is mentioned as *nabi* 25 times in the Quran. Noah (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*) 7, 154; Abraham ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*) 12, 47; Moses (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*) 11; Zoroaster (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*) 95, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1909) I: vii; Buddha ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*) 165; Krishna (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979) 94–5; *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha* I: vii); Jesus (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*)18; Muhammad (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*)20; the Bab (*Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, [Epistle to Muhammad Shah] Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982) 12; Baha'u'llah (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) paras. 1–5, 38, 80–4, 99, 103, 167.

to be definitive or exclusive. The context of his answer concerned the sacred number nine and was intended to reply to a particular query regarding the nine great religions. Shoghi Effendi's list includes the unknown founder of the monotheistic Sabaeen religion and names eight other major prophets: 'The nine religions to which you have referred include both the Bábí and the Bahá'í Dispensations, Bahá'u'lláh being the ninth Prophet in the series. The other Prophets included are Zoroaster, Krishna, Moses, the Christ, Muhammad, Buddha, the Prophet of the Sabaeans Whose name is unrecorded, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. . . . Buddha appeared in the Adamic cycle. . . .'⁹

His list, however, does not include Adam, Abraham, Noah, Hud, or Salih, the last three being mentioned in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. (In quranic usage Abraham, Hud and Salih are called *nabi* and *rasul*.) As cited in n. 8, Abraham is mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Baha in the same context as Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah; and he is mentioned among the 'Prophets' in the *Íqán* (62) belonging to the sequence of progressive revelation. The Bab asserts that the Primal Will (*mashiyat-i-avali*) appeared in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and 'the Point of the Bayán'(the Bab), and would appear in 'Him Whom God shall make manifest' (Baha'u'llah).¹⁰ His pronouncement suggests that all these prophets belong to the major category.

The Terminology Used to Designate the Manifestations of God/Prophets

'Abdu'l-Baha has determined that two classes of prophets can be universally identified—'independent' and 'follower.' He applies the following criteria to identify the independent prophets: the commencement of a new cycle; the revelation of a new book; the laying-down of laws, the reformation of morals and the instituting of new customs; a cosmic regeneration of creation; and the establishment of a new religion. The follower prophets promote the religion established by the independent prophets and usually institute reforms, but they depend upon the independent prophets for inspiration.¹¹ Other epithets may be applied to the two categories of prophets. For the purposes of this article, major/minor, manifestation of God/divine manifestation, independent/dependent, independent/follower will be alternatively used.

The most cogent way to distinguish the two classes of prophets would be the major/minor designation. This distinction has been observed in the subject index of the Revised Standard Version (1952) and the American Standard Version (1901) bibles to distinguish the four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) from the twelve minor prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi).¹² However, the use of 'major' and 'minor' when used in a Baha'i context has a significant difference from the biblically based usage of these two words.¹³

Overview of John the Baptist in Five Traditions

The Catholic apologist, writer and historian Henri Petiot, aka Daniel-Rops (1901–1965), observed that John the Baptist 'has been almost absorbed by the light of the divinity of Christ'.¹⁴ When the Baptist is recalled at all, he is remembered by Christians in his subservient

⁹ Letter of 13 July 1938, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Compilation of Compilations*, prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963–1990, 3 vols., [Mona Vale, NSW]: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991–2000, I: 20

¹⁰ The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 125.

¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'The Two Classes of Prophets', *Some Answered Questions* 164–5.

¹² The 1901 and 1952 versions are authorized revisions of the King James Version of 1611.

¹³ The most obvious difference is that none of the prophets listed as 'major' in the subject index of the ASV and the RSV is a major prophet in Baha'i understanding; all the 12 biblical prophets listed above would figure among the minor prophets. However, the nomenclature is useful and can be cogently applied to Baha'i theology.

¹⁴ Daniel-Rops, *Jesus and His Times*, vol. 1, trans. Ruby Millar, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1958, 76.

role as the forerunner of Christ, the fiery apocalyptic preacher who raised his call on the edge of the Judean desert, calling all Israel to repentance through baptism, and who proclaimed the imminent coming of Messiah.

The gospels themselves, our most substantial, although meagre source for the life and teachings of John, portray him with a certain ambivalence. Certain passages exalt the Baptist as a prophetic figure endowed with messiah-like stature who played a foundational role in the salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*)¹⁵ of the church and its *kerygma*¹⁶ of the imminent advent of the messianic kingdom. But scholars have concluded that the Book of John (with its theophanic logos theology) and a few passages in the Book of St. Matthew reflect an early church Baptist-Christian polemic that makes a conscious attempt to minimize John's role so as to ensure his subordination to Christ (to be discussed below).

The account of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (37–100 CE), a contemporary of both John and Jesus, is largely compatible with the bare historical outline of the gospel. Josephus reported in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (Book 18, chapter 5:2), that John was 'a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue', and held in high regard by the Jews of his time. Josephus mentions John's baptism, the marriage of the tetrarch Herod Antipas¹⁷ to Herodias, and the name of her daughter Salome, a name that is omitted in the gospel, but he confines himself to political matters. He excludes the incestuous story of John's condemnation of the marriage of the tetrarch to the Jewess Herodias (Mark 6: 21–29, Luke 3:19), the ruler's sister-in-law, which resulted in the Baptist's martyrdom.¹⁸ Jewish law forbade marriage to a sister-in-law (Lev. 18:16).

John's spellbinding preaching and divine charisma ensured his massive popularity with all Israel. But Pharisees and Sadducees fiercely guarded their vested interests against the threat that his reforms posed. John's condemnation of their corruption was not the sole cause of their outrage; they had doctrinal reasons for opposing the Baptist. Sadducees objected to his central institute of baptism (Gk. *baptizein*, 'to be dipped') because the popular rite was undermining temple sacrifice¹⁹ and their central role in the Jerusalem cultus; Sadducees also rejected his promise of a future life to the righteous, a belief that denied their this-worldly, anti-resurrection beliefs. Pharisees rejected his divine authority to baptize in the name of the imminent Messiah, who would baptize with 'fire' and the 'Holy Ghost' (Mat. 3:11). They opposed any rite or teaching that threatened official Judaism. According to Josephus, John's execution resulted from Herod's fear that the prophet was a potential threat to the tetrarch's authority 'for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise'.²⁰

¹⁵ A term that is central to Biblical Theology used to describe the story of the Bible as that of God's redemptive work in the events of history. W. R. F. Browning, 'Heilsgeschichte', *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 1997.

<www.encyclopedia.com> <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O94-Heilsgeschichte.html> (accessed 20 April 2012)

¹⁶ New Testament critic Rudolph Bultmann's, *Kerygma and Myth*, is the classic foundational work in the field. (English translation, 1953), along with C.H. Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching* (1936). Bultmann's work with its key concept 'demythologising' was highly controversial and generated a lively debate with Ernst Lohmeyer, Julius Schniewind, Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. For this exchange, see 'Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate' <<http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/Pdfs/BultmannNTMyth.pdf>>. (accessed 19 May 2012). The word *Kerygma* is a verbal noun coming from the Greek verb *kerussein* meaning 'to proclaim' or 'to announce'. *Kerygma* has become a technical term in biblical, especially Protestant, scholarship and refers both to the early church's proclamation of the fundamental Christian message of the dawning of the Messianic Age foretold by the prophets and to the necessary repentance befitting the sacrificial death, resurrection, and salvific role of the Christ.

¹⁷ Herod Antipas (Tetrarch) is not to be confused with his father, Herod the Great.

¹⁸ See his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, 5:2; Mark 6: 21–29 and Luke 3:19; *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whitson, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1960, 382.

¹⁹ Official Judaism had always opposed the monastic baptizing sects, since baptism became the central ritual that undermined temple worship.

²⁰ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, 5:2, *Josephus: Complete Works* 382.

The present-day Sabaeen-Mandaean followers of John the Baptist, who perform their baptismal rituals in the marshy rivers of the Tigris-Euphrates delta, claim John the Baptist as one of their prophets. But in their baptismal practice, despite the high station given to John in their sacred writings, John the Baptist is neither central nor greatly venerated. He functions more as a model *ganzibra*, the chief-priest who conducts baptismal rituals. The ritual has replaced the prophet.

The treatment of Yahya in the Quran is consistent with the main lines of the gospel, but the holy book presents John as a member of the ‘Family of Imran’ (Sura 3), i.e., as a first cousin of Jesus, and member of a larger family, whose most distinguished members—John and Jesus—became instrumental in proclaiming the divine economy of salvation. The hadiths provide some rare but significant mentions of Yahya that indicate that he was once the object of great veneration in Islam.

In their informative analysis of the *nabi-rasul* distinction in Islam, Baha’i scholars Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir correctly mention that Muhammad refers to John as *nabi* (prophet) (3:34), thereby distinguishing him from the higher category of *mursalin* (apostles/messengers). Fazel and Fananapazir argue persuasively (based mainly on the research of Willem A. Bijlfeld’s article, ‘A Prophet and More Than a Prophet?’) that *nabi* and *rasul* have distinct usages and meanings in the Quran, but they do acknowledge ‘overlap’.²¹ However, we cannot mechanically apply these norms to John the Baptist: he does not easily fit the basic *nabi-rasul* distinction. Despite its 1300-year-old analysis, Bijlfeld’s question as to whether or not *nabi* is ‘identical’ or ‘interchangeable’ with *rasul* remains problematic.²²

In response to Denis MacEoin’s 1974 article ‘Oriental Scholarship and the Bahá’í Faith,’ Kazem Kazemzadeh quoted some pertinent lines about John the Baptist from Baha’u’llah’s *Kitáb-i-Badí*, ‘His apologia, written to refute the accusations levelled against Him by Mirza Mihdiy-i-Rashti, corresponding to the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, revealed in defense of the Bábí Revelation.’²³ These brief mentions will be supplemented in the section below, ‘John the Baptist in the Baha’i Faith’, but suffice it to say here that Baha’u’llah made an emphatic comparison of the similarities that exist between the Babi-Baha’i dispensations and those of John and Jesus. Kazemzadeh has translated Baha’u’llah’s words as follows: ‘I swear by God that the Primal Point [the Bab] and this most luminous, most wondrous Manifestation [Baha’u’llah] are exactly like (*ayn be ayn*) the appearance of John, son of Zachariah, and the Spirit of God [Ruhu’llah—Jesus . . .],’²⁴

While Kazemzadeh deserves thanks for bringing Baha’u’llah’s scriptures on this topic to the attention of Western readers, his translation of *ayn be ayn* as ‘exactly alike’ is dubious, since it exaggerates the comparison Baha’u’llah is making into a perfect equation. ‘Similar’ or ‘parallel’ would be more accurate. And while the parallels are most assuredly present, as this article will

²¹ Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir, ‘A Bahá’í Approach to the claim of finality in Islam’, *Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, 5(3), 1993, 17–40. See especially 21–6 for the *nabi-rasul* distinction, and 36 for ‘Overview and Analytic Summary’. Bijlfeld’s article, ‘A Prophet and More Than a Prophet?’ is from *The Muslim World*, 59(3), 1969, 1–28.

²² Fazel and Fananapazir have relied mainly on Willem A. Bijlfeld’s article for their conclusions. However, despite Jazā’irī’s oft-quoted neat, catechismal formula, ‘Therefore, is every apostle (*rasul*) a prophet (*nabi*) but not every prophet an apostle’ (quoted by Bijlfeld, A Prophet 13), Bijlfeld’s article shows that no iron-clad conclusions about the *nabi-rasul* distinction can be drawn, rather, only general tendencies, with particular exceptions.

²³ Kazemzadeh was quoting Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* 172. MacEoin’s ‘Oriental Scholarship and the Bahá’í Faith’ appeared in *World Order*, 8(4), Summer 1974, 9–21. It attracted general notice at the time as an example of high-level academic scholarship on the Baha’i faith.

²⁴ *Kitáb-i-Badí* 161, quoted by Kazemzadeh, ‘Oriental Scholarship’, letter to *World Order*, (2), Winter 1974–75, 4. Baha’u’llah’s original tablet is also quoted by Fazel-i-Mazandarani in his *Asrāru’l-Áthār* (A Glossary of Baha’i Terms), Tehran: Bahá’í National Publishing Trust, 1972, 4: 233.

demonstrate, Baha'u'llah's metaphor is broad; scientific exactitude is not intended in the comparison between the two dispensations.

Relying in part on a passage from the prolific Ishraq-i-Khavari, 'the philosopher of the East', in his *Qamús-i-Íqán* (Commentary on the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*), Kazemzadeh would appear to have accepted as literal-grammatical the comparison of Baha'u'llah, i.e., that John was a major prophet/divine manifestation. One phrase from Baha'u'llah does admittedly give us pause. Baha'u'llah is accurately quoted by Kazemzadeh as saying that John is '*nabi va rasul*,'²⁵ (prophet and messenger), a designation that would qualify him for major prophethood, at least following Islamic terminology. But it should be emphasized here that whatever the contested distinctions between a *nabi* and a *rasul* there may be in Islamic theology, they cannot be considered normative for Baha'is. Although close similarities do exist, Baha'i usages of these terms do not mirror exactly their popular Islamic counterparts.²⁶ However, an in-depth analysis of the *nabi-rasul* distinction is beyond the scope of the article and is not crucial to our thesis.

John the Baptist in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

The Life of John: Apocalyptic²⁷ Prophet of Righteousness

Tradition says that John the Baptist was born at 'Ayn Karim, a village some seven miles southwest of Jerusalem.²⁸ He was born into a priestly family. His father, Zachariah, and his mother, Elizabeth, were both descendants of Aaron, the first Jewish high priest, and belonged to the tribe of Levi, the sacerdotal caste of Judaism. The first chapter of Luke's gospel, which some scholars believe to be a Baptist document, celebrates his birth with signs, portents, and divine names, indicating that a Messiah-like prophet had been born.²⁹ Like Christ's, John's birth was miraculous. His elderly parents had remained childless, but Gabriel, the angel of annunciation and revelation, appeared to Zachariah while he was serving in the temple and announced the birth of a son, John, who 'will be great before the lord', and who 'will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb' (Luke 1:15). Gabriel announces John's mission as causing the repentance of Israel, 'in the spirit and power of Elijah'. John will make of Israel 'a people prepared' (Luke 1:17).

John was orphaned at an early age. The tragic fate of his parents has come down in differing versions.³⁰ We are not informed about John's childhood, youth, and early adulthood. Luke has

²⁵ *Kitáb-i-Badí* 161.

²⁶ In traditional Islamic belief, a *rasul* brings a new *shariah*. Even though Baha'u'llah designates John '*nabi va rasul*', John did not bring a new religious law, nor did he abrogate Jewish law.

²⁷ The distinction between apocalyptic and eschatological is blurred. John could also be called 'the eschatological prophet'. His fiery language warning of the coming wrath is clearly apocalyptic, but his coming is realized eschatology, since he came at the end of the Jewish cycle of prophets and was himself prophesied in scripture. His apocalyptic language pointed to a realized eschatology, despite the imminent messianic expectation.

²⁸ This is probably the biblical Aenon near Salim, but the actual site is uncertain (John 3:23).

²⁹ 'And there appeared unto him [Zacharias] an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings' (Luke 1: 11–19).

³⁰ In the apocryphal Book of James (*Protovangelium*), Zachariah is slain in the temple by Herod's officers after his wife, Elizabeth, has fled into the mountains. Origen relates that Zachariah was slain because he allowed Mary to

him disappearing into the desert wilderness, ‘waxing strong in spirit . . . till the day of his shewing unto Israel’ (Luke 1: 80). A.S. Geysler was one scholar who was strongly persuaded that during his lost years John was reared by the celibate branch of the Essenes.³¹ Certain definite parallels do exist between John’s ascetic lifestyle and that of the Essenes,³² who lived in anticipation of the coming Messiah, and who were probably the same sect as the monks of Qumran.³³ But if John were reared in an Essene monastery, he would have either left upon receiving his prophetic mission or have been expelled, because his prophetic claim, teachings, and public preaching would not have accorded with Essene beliefs, practices, and monastic lifestyle.³⁴

John raised his prophetic voice about 27 CE, shattering a silence that had reigned over Israel for about 500 years³⁵ and fulfilling Malachi’s prophecy that Yahweh would send ‘Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD’ (Mal. 4:5). The ascetic preacher proclaimed his message with an unusual intensity and dramatic urgency: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mat. 3:2). John revealed himself as the pre-messianic prophet of righteousness. It was his burning conviction that the messianic age was about to dawn and the fulfillment of age-old prophecy about the coming Anointed One was occurring: ‘Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees’ (Mat. 3:10). The time for severing ties with the old dispensation had come. Walter Wink made the point that for the evangelist Matthew, John, not Jesus, begins the gospel with his proclamation of a new age heralding salvation and the promised Kingdom of God.³⁶ Only the righteous could pass judgment and enter the coming kingdom: ‘Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire’ (Luke 3:9).

The Baptist’s asceticism, charisma, humility, holy courage, and passionate rhetoric soon spread his fame as a prophet throughout Jerusalem, the region around the Jordan and the whole province of Judea (Mat. 3:5). Thousands came to hear his dramatic message and to receive his baptism at Aenon (‘springs’) near Salim, a Samaritan stronghold, and at Bethany beyond Jordan.

Through John’s baptism, the rare face-to-face encounter of two living prophets took

take her place among the Jewish temple virgins, although the existence of temple virgins is contested. Charles H.H. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, 57.

³¹ A. S. Geysler, ‘The Youth of John the Baptist’, *Novum Testamentum*, I, 1956, 70–5.

³² Pious, sectarian Jews who lived during the last two centuries BCE and who were known to Philo and Flavius Josephus. Like the Essenes, John had withdrawn in the desert wilderness and lived under a Nazirite vow. Like the Essenes, he also refrained from prepared food. John also opposed the Jewish priesthood, as did the Essenes. John only baptized after the confession of sins, as was the Essene practice. However, a voluminous literature exists as to what extent the Essene movement influenced John the Baptist, Christ, and the early church. The question even has its own journal (1958–) *La Revue de Qumran* that publishes research based on the Dead Sea/Qumran Scrolls.

³³ The village of Khirbet Qumran, in the northwest corner of the Dead Sea, became famous for its discovery of the Dead Sea/Qumran Scrolls by two Bedouin shepherds in 1947. The cave became known as Qumran Cave 1. Subsequent archaeological excavations between 1949–1956 in Cave 1 and 10 other caves uncovered a sizeable commune, generally thought to have been built by the Essenes. A library of approximately 800 manuscripts and manuscript fragments, including artefacts, dating from 200 BCE to 68 CE was discovered. During the siege of Jerusalem, Roman legionaries destroyed the Qumran community circa 70 CE.

³⁴ Essenes were of two types: conjugal and celibate. Marrying Essenes usually lived in villages, while celibate Essenes were withdrawn and monastic. The celibate Essenes only allowed males only to join their community, whereas, John allowed women to join his ministry; John’s baptism and mission were public, whereas, the Essenes were withdrawn. The Essenes would have had to recognize John as the prophet who came in the spirit of Elijah, or as the cryptic ‘Teacher of Righteous’ mentioned in the Damascus document of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is probable that some Essenes did accept both John the Baptist and Christ and formed the nucleus of the Baptist and later Christian communities.

³⁵ Jewish scholarly consensus dates the composition of the book between 432–424 BCE.

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10321-malachi-book-of> (accessed 21 February 2012)

³⁶ Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1968, 35.

place: ‘Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him’. (Mat. 3:13–17). This encounter of two living prophets has no known parallel in religious scripture. Although John protested the baptism, saying that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, Christ prevailed upon him to fulfil the law: ‘And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness’. (Mat. 3: 15). This passage in Matthew is a close parallel to the non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews that St. Jerome identifies with the original Aramaic Matthew, in which John begs Jesus: ‘I beg, thee, Lord, baptise me.’³⁷ The acceptance of John’s baptism by Jesus proved to be a weapon in the hands of those Baptists who later rejected Christ because receiving baptism was an indication of sinfulness. In reality, as Jesus indicated, it signified Christ’s willingness to submit to the law of John before the inception of the Messiah’s own mission.

This meeting of John and Jesus marks the close association of the two prophets, an affinity presented more fully in the section below as ‘The Holy Family Motif: The Close Affinity of John and Jesus.’ John’s martyrdom, caused by the outrage of an accused adulteress, ended his brief three-year ministry. John was imprisoned and beheaded (Luke 3: 19–20) in the prison-fortress of Machaerus through a sordid scheme conceived by Herodias with the connivance of her daughter Salome, who asked Herod Antipas for the head of John the Baptist ‘in a charger’ (platter) as a reward for dancing provocatively before the tetrarch on his birthday. (Mark 6:17–29). The tragic scenario was, in fact, more convoluted. Antipas was already married to the Arabian princess Aretas, and Herodias to the tetrarch Philip I, who was no less a person than Antipas’s own half-brother, with whom Herodias already had a daughter. The fact that Herodias was a Jewess made the scandal all the more flagrant.³⁸

The Ritual Law of Salvation: The Baptism of Repentance

Baha’u’llah wrote that John ‘came with laws and commandments.’³⁹ The central law was baptism through which John heightened his followers’ consciousness of the imminent coming of Messiah. ‘Abdu’l-Baha confirmed the lawful character of baptism by referring to it as ‘the institution of John’.⁴⁰ Baptism was an ancient Judaic rite renewed by the prophet and given new meaning. John’s baptism, like that of the Essenes, was a baptism of repentance, referred to by ‘Abdu’l-Baha in a similar phrase as the ‘ablution of repentance.’⁴¹ Baptism was in reality more ancient than immediate pre-Christian times, dating back to early Israel, thus confirming ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s affirmation that ‘it [baptism] was in reality formerly practised in the religion of God.’⁴² Research on the Dead Sea/Qumran Scrolls has validated ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s statement. Baptism was much older than the Samaritans. It reached as far back as five centuries before John was born, into the Rechabite clan.⁴³

But unlike the Jewish proselyte baptism in which the convert baptized himself, John’s baptism was publicly administered by the prophet himself. His baptismal rite was entirely without precedent. Although baptism in Judaism, either by total immersion, aspersion, or pouring, had long signified ritual purity for food, utensils, or persons, and served as a rite of conversion,⁴⁴ it had never been used as a symbol for individual and collective redemption

³⁷ Quoted by Maurice Goguel in *Au Seuil de l’Evangile: Jean-Baptiste* (On the Threshold of the Gospel: John the Baptist), Paris: Payot, 1928, 172.

³⁸ ‘Herod Antipas’, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 3rd rev. ed., Chicago, Moody Press, 1966, 472.

³⁹ *Kitáb-i-Badí* 159, quoted by Kazemzadeh in his letter to *World Order*.

⁴⁰ ‘Abdu’l Bahá, *Questions* 91.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ See Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Jewish Background of the New Testament*, New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1961, 73–4.

⁴⁴ See ‘Jewish Baptism’ by R. J. Grigaitis. He gives *Tevilah* (full body) and *Netilat Yadayim* (pouring water over the hands) for the practice. He says that both types were used by Christians. John’s baptism probably imitated the total

from sin. With the possible exception of the Essenes, it had never served for messianic preparation. As such, John's baptism could be regarded as multisymbolic. Not only did it serve as a powerful rite and symbol for redemption and messianic preparation, but, according to B. H. Streeter, it also sealed the cycle of Jewish prophets, marking the transition into the messianic kingdom and the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy.⁴⁵

Clerical opposition resulted in a delegation of priests and Levites being sent from Jerusalem to question John about his right to baptize (John 1:19ff.). The passage ends abruptly telling us only that John proclaimed to them his preparatory mission, thus asserting his prophetic authority. Priests merited no special exemption from John's judgment; a corrupt priesthood who occupied Moses' seat received instead his condemnation. The anticlerical Baptist had stigmatized the Jewish priesthood as, 'You brood of vipers' (Mat. 3:7), warning them to 'flee from the wrath to come', and to 'bear fruit that befits repentance' (Mat. 3:7–8).

Prayer and Fasting, Diet, Inclusive Salvation, Non-Violence, Equity, and Social Equality

Closer examination of the sources yields other laws and teachings that characterize a religion of stern piety and spiritual rigour, in keeping with the imperative of preparation for the messianic age. While John's first will was to instil messianic consciousness into his followers, he appears in the gospels as a teacher of righteousness entirely in his own right. John gave other teachings not recorded in the Gospel, for Luke mentions that '[s]o with many other exhortations, He preached good news to the people' (3:18). Although regrettably these 'many other exhortations' have not been fully preserved, the passages contained in Luke 3:10–14 nonetheless give certain brief but significant indications.

Prayer and Fasting

Along with baptism, the main laws were frequent prayer and fasting. The laws of prayer and fasting, operating in John's brief three-year dispensation, heightened the mindfulness required by messianic expectation. The Gospel records this reproach of the Pharisees to Jesus, 'The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink' (Luke 5:33). This sentence indicates that Christ relaxed some of John's laws and that the Pharisees judged Christ's disciples to be lax vis-à-vis John's. The disciples of John must have been known by the example of their prayerfulness, for Luke also records the petition of an unnamed disciple of Christ who says, 'Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples' (Luke 11:1). In an instructive study, Joseph Thomas concludes that John gave his disciples prayers to hasten the coming of the messianic reign.⁴⁶

The Baptist's Diet

John's spiritual rigour was demonstrated through his dietary regimen and asceticism. According to Gabriel's birth proclamation to his father, Zachariah, John would not drink 'wine nor strong drink' (Luke 1:15). His Nazirite vow⁴⁷ also required abstention from cutting his hair⁴⁸ and eating

immersion of Jewish *Tevilah* baptism. For males, circumcision also accompanied conversion.

<<http://grigaitis.net/weekly/2007/2007-06-08.html>> (accessed 20 March 2012)

⁴⁵ See B. H. Streeter, 'Was the Baptist's Preaching Apocalyptic?', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 14, 1912–13, 549–52.

⁴⁶ Joseph Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste en Palestine et Syrie, 150 av. J.C.–300 ap. J.C.* (The Baptist Movement in Palestine and Syria, 150 BC–AD300), Gembloux: Duchlot, 1935, 93.

⁴⁷ In most cases, the Nazirite, one who was set apart, made a voluntary vow of abstinence. In John's case, the angel Gabriel prescribed the vow with the birth announcement to Zachariah. The most readily recognizable sign of the Nazirite was long, flowing hair. For the details of the history and contents of the Nazirite vow, see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11395-nazarite>. (accessed 30 April 2012)

⁴⁸ We recall that Samson, the twelfth and last judge of Israel, who waged war on the Philistines, was under a Nazirite vow that included never cutting his hair. The hero of the Danite folk tale was pressed by his lover Delilah

red meat. That John was a vegetarian is certain because it was a requirement of Nazirites. As a desert-dweller, John would not have had access to prepared food, and it is likely that he contented himself with nutriment in its natural state. The ‘locusts and wild honey’ (Mat. 3:4) on which John survived were probably not the wild locusts that were permitted in Lev. 11:22—although forbidden in Deut. 14:19—but the fruit of the Locust Tree, known commonly as St. John’s bread, i.e., carobs, the chocolate-like peas found in the pods of an eastern Mediterranean evergreen. His diet would have included any roots, stems, and fruit that were available. Nothing indicates that John imposed vegetarianism on his followers, and it is unlikely that he did so, since some of his followers were city-dwellers from Jerusalem.

Inclusive Salvation, Non-Violence, Equity, and Social Equality

John’s messianic proclamations, laws and preaching had an iconoclastic impact on his Jewish contemporaries. The Baptist shattered long-held, exclusive Jewish salvationist beliefs. Neither priesthood nor lineal descent from Abraham ensured de facto salvation: ‘Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’ (Luke 3:8). Johannite salvation required that all Israelites observe righteous living to merit the presence of the coming Messiah.

His intent to abolish the sectarian framework of Judaism was indicated by John’s preaching to the Samaritans, the first of the Jewish sects, who were held in contempt by orthodox Jews. As mentioned above, at one time in his ministry, he had even made Aenon near Salim in Samaria a locus of baptism. John may have had special reasons for preaching to the Samaritans. The Samaritans, like the Jews, had their own messianic eschatology, and John appears to fulfil the requisites of the Samaritan Messiah, the *Ta’heb*, whose role was to be the ‘restorer’ of Judaism. (See sections below.) In Luke 3: 10–14, John exhorted the multitudes, the tax collectors, and soldiers to observe five spiritual precepts: All were bidden to share goods and food; tax collectors (‘publicans’) were forbidden extortion; soldiers were forbidden violence and bearing false witness, and were exhorted to be content with wages.

The rite of baptism had a leveling social effect. The coming of the Messiah had to be a public concern. John’s public ministry was, consequently, at odds with the elitism of the closed Jewish sects like the Essenes for whom male monasticism was a way of life. His religion was publicly proclaimed; his baptism publicly administered; his disciples lived in the world. Women were included, a marked departure from patriarchal religion. Unlike male-dominated temple worship, in John’s religion, no discrimination was practiced against women. Women and men received the same treatment in the administration of baptism. According to Jesus, prostitutes (‘harlots’), unlike clerics, believed John. Their acceptance explains Christ’s anti-clerical judgment, ‘Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him’ (Mat. 21:31–32).

More Than a Prophet: John as the *Ta’heb*, the Samaritan Messiah

We can safely conclude from New Testament form critical studies (*Formgeschichte*)⁴⁹ that John the Baptist affected his generation more decisively than is commonly supposed. This is because of

to reveal the secret of his strength. He finally confessed to her that weakness would follow if his hair were cut, thus breaking his Nazirite vow. The story resembles a modern spy tale: Delilah was temptress and betrayer for money as the paid agent of the Philistines to discover the secret of Samson’s strength (Judges 16:17–19). The blinded Samson died in the Philistine temple of Dagon, when, in an act of revenge for the loss of his eyes, he either pushed or pulled two pillars apart, bringing the temple down, and killing the rulers and all those inside.

⁴⁹ *Formgeschichte*, literally, ‘history of forms’. Form criticism was a school within Biblical Criticism for both testaments. For the Gospel, although the original intent was to establish the most reliable record of the sayings and

the close association of John and Jesus.⁵⁰ His divine charisma led some to believe that he was the Messiah (Luke 3:15). Herod, John's eventual executioner, thought that Christ was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mat. 14:1–2). The memory of John was still fresh in memory years after his martyrdom. Writing in the first century CE, Josephus relates that a momentary defeat inflicted upon Herod Antipas by Aretas, King of the Nabataeans, (circa 37 CE), was taken by the people as a sign of God's punishment on the tetrarch for putting John to death.⁵¹

The most revealing statements about John come from Jesus himself. The Gospel records this significant remark to the crowds: 'Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet . . . Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist' (Mat. 11:9–11). Some scholars hold that the subsequent adverse clause, 'yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he' (Mat. 11:11), was a polemical gloss directed by Christians to those Baptists who had rejected Christ after 50 CE.⁵² The preceding sentence, left to stand alone, would have armed the Baptists to undercut the primacy of Jesus.

Jesus's reference to John as being 'more than a prophet,' indicates that Christ intended a being of greater magnitude than the Jewish concept of the *nabi*, an ordinary man possessed by the Holy Spirit who carried a message from Yahweh. Christ's metaphor, 'What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?' (Mat. 11:7), strongly suggests that if John was not endowed with 'constancy,' in the sense that Baha'is understand the term, he was nonetheless a being unshakable.

The Ta'heb's Mission of Restoration

Christ adds another dimension to John's mission when he says that Elijah (John) 'is to restore all things' (Mark 9:11). Here we understand that John's role as 'restorer' of Judaism satisfies the main requisite of the Samaritan Messiah, the *Ta'heb*. As mentioned above, the fact that John had made Samaria at one time the locus of his preaching may indicate that John intended to answer the messianic expectation of the Samaritans. Even the very name of the Samaritan Messiah, *Ta'heb*, would appear to point to John, since the Aramaic root of the word yields 'to restore' as one of its meanings.⁵³

Another function of the *Ta'heb* in Samaritan eschatology 'was to be that of precursor of the Messiah-ben-David, and his particular duty to collect and lead home the scattered Ten Tribes', a function that points directly to John.⁵⁴ In this respect, the Samaritan expectation did not differ greatly from the Jewish expectation of Elijah. But what is significant here is the

doings of Christ, ironically, it led to a great deal of scepticism about the originality and provenance of the words of Jesus and the beliefs of the early church. It greatly eroded the historical Jesus. Form criticism was related to literary criticism. It analyzed and interpreted epigrams, myths, letters, psalms, laments, legends, miracles, and parables found in oral and written traditions. Form critics gathered and analyzed these units and observed how the forms persisted and/or changed. The units were examined in their *Sitz im Leben* (life-setting) (H. Gunkel), i.e., their social function in the community. Schmidt, Bultmann, and Debelius figured among the founders of the field for New Testament studies.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* 33–6.

⁵¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:5:2. The Nabataeans were a remarkable people originally from Arabia. Pushing out of the peninsula, they reached their high point between 200 BCE–100 CE, capturing the lands to the southeast of Palestine. Petra, south of the Dead Sea, became their capital. Merrill F. Unger, 'Nabataeans', *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, 772.

⁵² Carl H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, New York: Scribner's Sons, 1951, 138. Kraeling refers to those German scholars who hold the theory that this verse is a Christian interpolation. See M. Dibelius, *Johannes der Täufer* (John the Baptist), Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition* (The History of the Synoptic Tradition), and E. Lohmeyer, *Johannes der Täufer* (John the Baptist).

⁵³ J.A. Montgomery, *The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect*, New York: Ktav Publishing, 1907, 246. Other meanings of the root yield 'to return', 'to cause change of heart'.

⁵⁴ Montgomery, *The Samaritans* 243.

fact that for the Samaritans the *Ta'heb* was a Messiah-figure in his own right, a second Moses, as they believed. Samaritan eschatology made particularly pointed promises of the coming of their Messiah as the restorer of all things Judaic.

This mission of restoration included the reanimation of the voice of prophecy, a voice that had been silent since Malachi five centuries earlier. With prophecy John restored divine judgment, judgment that he said was imminent and had really begun with his dispensation. With prophecy and the preaching of judgment, he restored divine laws (baptism, prayer, fasting), laws that had instilled righteousness into his followers, a righteousness that ultimately gave birth to the Christian community. In sum, John's work was to restore and complete quintessential Judaism so that the Israelites might recognize the Messiah.

Unifying the Twelve Tribes

John's work of restoration, moreover, can be understood in the spiritually cosmic sense of a revitalizer and unifier of the Twelve Tribes. As such, his work involved the preparation of the whole nation. The Book of Acts refers to John's preaching 'to all the people of Israel' (Acts 13:24). Speaking of the Messiah's forerunner, Luke reports 'And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God' (1:16). Preaching to the Samaritans clearly reveals that John regarded this despised sect of Jewry as a member of the body of God's faithful.

The Return of Elijah: The Priest-Prophet

It is well known that both Jewish scripture and rabbinical teaching had stated that Elijah would herald the Messiah's coming. Jesus clearly stated that John was Elijah (Mat. 11:14), that his coming was prophesied in scripture (Mat. 3:23, Isa. 40:3, Mal. 4:5) as was his martyrdom: 'But I tell you that Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him' (Mark 9:13). John's dress was itself a symbolic indicator that he identified himself with Elijah. Both prophets wore identical clothing—a coat of rough-spun camel's hair and a leather girdle about the waist (Mat. 3:4).⁵⁵

In heralding Messiah's coming, however, John's mission extended beyond proclamation. Elijah is the power figure of the Tanakh. G. F. Moore writes that 'He was the incarnation of zeal for the Lord'.⁵⁶ Through no other prophet, except Moses, did God perform such mighty works. Elijah's mission was vindicated through a series of miracles. The very fact that history has given way to myth and folklore in some of these accounts is a sure sign of the great veneration enjoyed by this prophet. The contest on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40) and Elijah's ascent into heaven in a whirlwind of fire (2 Kings 2:11–13) are the most well-known miracle-stories. The Mandaean-Sabaeen *Ginza* (Treasury) also mentions John's performing miraculous healings.⁵⁷

The Holy Family Motif: The Close Affinity of John and Jesus

John's life and ministry are intimately linked to the life and ministry of Jesus. The Book of Matthew especially points to a close collaboration between John and Jesus. Walter Wink even affirms assimilation of one prophet to the other.⁵⁸ Christ repeats the very words of John's teaching, 'Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Mat. 3:2). This affinity of John and Jesus began literally in the womb and continued until John's martyrdom. The gospel account records John's extraordinary leaping in the womb at his recognition of Jesus as Mary approached

⁵⁵ This clothing was the explicit dress of a prophet. Some authorities say the belt was of goatskin.

⁵⁶ G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, 2: 58.

⁵⁷ The reader is referred to the section below 'The Sabaeans-Mandaeans: The Community of John the Baptist and its Scriptures'. See n. 87.

⁵⁸ For his discussion of assimilation, see Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* 33–6.

John's mother, Elizabeth (Luke 1:44). John was the first to believe in Jesus and to perceive within him Christ's sacrificial death of atonement (John 1:29). Christ's messianic consciousness springs from his baptism by John (Mat. 3:13–17). In one Jewish Targum, an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible for Jews who could no longer understand the sacred tongue, Elijah was to share in Israel's deliverance from the oppressor, along with the Messiah: 'And then shall thy sign be expiated, O community of Zion! Thou shalt be delivered by the Messiah thy King and by Elijah the priest.'⁵⁹

Maurice Goguel held that Jesus had been originally a follow of John the Baptist, preached his baptism of repentance, and collaborated with John's disciples in the Transjordan at Peraea,⁶⁰ just as Baha'u'llah had taught the cause of the Bab prior to the former's announcement of his mission. At John's martyrdom, his disciples made a special point of going to tell Jesus, completing the association that had begun at birth and ended at death. Jesus even draws a parallel between his own martyrdom and that of John the Baptist (Mat. 17:12).

But it was not only in their kinship, lives, and missions that the affinity of John and Jesus became evident. It also lay in certain of their kerygmatic teachings, especially the proclamation of the messianic age, and in the way the Christian church was born from the seed of the Baptist community. John's teaching that the time was now fulfilled and that eschatological judgment was already breaking upon the world was taken up by Jesus (Luke 10:13–15). Christ repeats John's theme of repentance to gain entry into the Kingdom of God. Jesus preached the forgiveness of sin through belief in him, just as John had done through the administration of baptism.

The gospel also records a mystical association between John and Jesus. I refer to the mountain scene of Christ's transfiguration, in which his shining, glorified body, 'exceeding white as snow', is witnessed by the disciples Peter, James, and John (Mt. 17:1–13; Mark 9: 2-13; Luke 9: 28–36). In the vision, Christ shares a mystical communion with Moses and Elijah (Gk. Elias), that is, John. The transfiguration's Christian apologetic significance establishes the triumphal sonship of Jesus over the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). But viewed retrospectively, through a Baha'i lens, this scene illustrates a gospel protovision of prophetic unity, since Jesus holds intimate, divine intercourse with Moses and Elijah. The transfiguration represents the first biblical representation of prophetic collegiality.

The Gospel informs us that two of John's disciples became followers of Jesus at John's bidding (John 1:35–37, 40). One of these two, Andrew—the other disciple is unnamed—led his brother, St. Peter, to Christ. Carl Kraeling theorizes that the rapid swelling of Christian ranks in the early church from an estimated 12,000 to 20,000 believers may have come from the followers of John.⁶¹ The Book of Acts gives no such numbers, but records the rapid growth of converts in the Jewish churches of Jerusalem and Antioch (Acts 11: 21, 26), and through Paul's missionary journeys to the Gentiles (Acts 17:4, 12, 19: 18,20, 28:23, 30). If Kraeling's estimate is accurate, it would be further evidence of the validity of Baha'u'llah's strong affirmation of a parallel between the Baptist-Christian, Babi-Baha'i dispensations, i.e., that many of Baha'u'llah's followers were originally Babis, just as these early Christians would have first been Baptists.

When to turn to the Quran, however, a more definitive and larger affinity emerges. The Quran depicts Elizabeth and Mary as sisters, and John and Jesus as first cousins. The KJV

⁵⁹ 'Targum Threni', in *Monumenta Talmudica*, Vienna and Leipzig: Orion Press, 1914, I: 52, quoted by Nosratollah Rassekh in 'Islam: The First 138 Years', *World Order*, 15(1–2), Fall 1980/Winter 1981, 16. The Targums eventually became commentaries for their own sake.

⁶⁰ Goguel, *Au Seuil* 243–9.

⁶¹ Kraeling, *John the Baptist* 172–3.

indicates the relationship more vaguely, saying only that Elizabeth, the mother of the Baptist, is the ‘cousin’ (kinswoman) of Mary (Gk. *suggenis*) (Luke 1:36). Catholic tradition also links the two families and depicts John and Jesus playing together as children.⁶² This blood relationship of contemporary prophets, who fulfil God’s plan to proclaim the economy of salvation, actually extends to a complete family mentioned above called the ‘Family of Imran’ (Sura 3). Compressing the relationships from Sura 3, we find that Imran (Zachariah) and Hannah (Anne) were the parents of the Virgin Mary and her sister Elizabeth; Mary and Elizabeth became parents of the prophets John and Jesus. Together they form the family of Imran.

The Angel Gabriel and John’s Birth Narrative: John or Jesus?

Form Critical Studies also underscore the importance of John’s prophetic status. His birth narrative indicates that a very singular personage had been born, one of Messiah-like stature. John’s birth is celebrated in Luke 1, which some scholars believe to be a Baptist document coming from Q (Ger. *Quelle*=source).⁶³ As a Q document, it qualifies as being among the earliest of Christian writings and indicates the great veneration of John by the first Christians. Like Jesus, John’s birth narrative begins with the annunciation. It is the angel Gabriel who announces to John’s father, Zachariah, the birth of the prophet: ‘I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God’ (Luke 1:19). This mention is significant because Gabriel, the messenger of revelation, is a hypostasis of the Divinity itself, most often associated with the ‘manifestations endowed with constancy’. It is also Gabriel who announces the birth of Jesus to Mary (Luke 1:26). Kraeling thinks that John’s birth announcement has served as a model for that of Jesus and not vice-versa.⁶⁴

According to a Muslim tradition, Waraqa ibnul Naufal (a contemporary of Muhammad), one of Khadija’s learned nephews, and one of the monotheistic Abrahamic *hanafa*, it was Gabriel who revealed the Decalogue to Moses,⁶⁵ and according to the Quran and the hadith infused Muhammad with divine revelation on Mt. Hira (Sura 2:97–98). With his birth announcement, John is keeping company with the Major Prophets. John’s singularity is emphasized through a miraculous conception, for his father is old and his mother is well-past childbearing years. His father gives him a new name, ‘Johannan’, i.e., God has been gracious, thus breaking with the Jewish custom of namesaking. This new name is meant to emphasize John’s greatness.

The purported Baptist document of Luke 1 contains two canticles praising God for His visitation upon Israel—the Benedictus (Luke 1:69–79) spoken by John’s father, Zachariah, and the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) spoken by Mary. The Benedictus refers to the Baptist in unmistakable soteriological terms. John is depicted here as a saviour figure: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us’ (v. 68). Zachariah praises God for fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant through the house of David and states that John’s mission is ‘to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins’ (v. 77), a phrase that is strikingly similar to the mission of Jesus.

⁶² Scobie, *John the Baptist* 56.

⁶³ Scobie, *John the Baptist* 54ff. The Q source, along with the gospel of Mark, is a hypothetical original Aramaic gospel, either written or oral, used by the first Christians and the gospel writers to redact the Greek text. The independent Baptist source for Luke I has very wide support, although Wink believes that it was part of the earliest Christian traditions about John. It was first proposed by D. Volter, ‘Die Apocalypse des Zacharias im Evangelium des Lucas’ (The Apocalypse of Zachariah in the Gospel of Luke), in *Theologische Tijdschrift*, 1896, 30: 244–69. His theory was developed by Bultmann, Eisler, Goguel, Dibelius, and others.

⁶⁴ Kraeling, *John the Baptist* 16.

⁶⁵ Cited by Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1957, 75. The *hanif* was a monotheist who had already rejected polytheism when Muhammad declared his mission. Muhammad referred to Abraham as his prototype whose religion he intended to restore to its original pure state. The *hanif* constituted a pure monotheist of the original Abrahamic religion of those living in Saudi Arabia.

In the KJV, the Magnificat is spoken by Mary, referring to Jesus. However, in the oldest Latin MSS, and when quoted in the writings of the church fathers, the first verse of the canticle reads, 'And Elizabeth said,' Elizabeth being John's mother. Interpolation is suspected here in view of the fact that the oldest Latin MSS refer to John.⁶⁶ If Elizabeth is indeed meant, it would be further evidence that John was in the beginning seen as a Messiah figure in his own right but was not left to stand as such to avoid any rivalry with the Jesus.

A significant point in this analysis is the 'twin messiah' theory. The Essene community, whose existence was predicated on the coming of Messiah, anticipated not one but two Messiahs. K. G. Kuhn quotes an Essene work, the *Manual of Discipline*, which mentions the coming 'of the two Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.'⁶⁷ The Messiah of Aaron descended from the Aaronic tribe of Levi, and the Messiah of Israel descended from the tribe of Judah. Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, descended from the tribe of Judah and the house of David. Although Kuhn does not attribute the Aaronic messiahship to John, it follows that John is the Aaronic Messiah, because he descended from the Aaronic priesthood. W. H. Brownlee has argued, based on an Essene hymn scroll, that the Essene community viewed itself to be the mother of the Messiah.⁶⁸ If John had been reared by the Essenes, as A. S. Geysler has argued,⁶⁹ he would literally have fulfilled this prediction. But it must be noted that John nowhere claimed messiahship.

John the Baptist in the Gospel of John: Echoes of a Baptist-Christian Polemic

The fourth gospel, which is a later redaction than the synoptic gospels, greatly minimizes the role of John the Baptist, the likely outcome of a Baptist-Christian polemic. The fourth gospel makes no mention of John's baptism of Jesus, for the theophanic logos theology of the fourth gospel could scarcely allow the preexistent Word made flesh (John 1:14) to submit to a baptism of repentance. Further, the fourth gospel makes John state that at one time he did not recognize Jesus, 'I myself did not know Him' (John 1:33), and the passages in John 1:29–34 read like an apologetic statement to demonstrate Jesus' superiority to John. The Book of John even makes John deny that he is the promised Elijah (John 1:21); whereas, Jesus explicitly affirms the contrary identification of Elijah with John (Mat. 11:14). 'Abdu'l-Baha gave his own interpretation to reconcile these two contradictory gospel passages, having recourse to two voices: the voice of the metaphysical return of the 'qualities and perfections' of Elijah in John, one the one hand, and the voice of discrete individual identity and human personality, on the other hand.'⁷⁰ E. F. Scott has written that John is introduced into the narrative of the fourth gospel only for the purpose of revealing his inferiority to Jesus: 'Indeed it is not too much to say that John is introduced into the narrative for no other purpose than to bring out the fact of his inferiority.'⁷¹

The Sabaeans-Mandaeans: The Community of John the Baptist and its Scriptures

Before presenting the Islamic and Baha'i perspectives, it would serve our purpose to consider the community of John the Baptist and its sacred writings. This community is significant for two reasons: it was mentioned by Baha'u'llah under the name 'Sabaean' as still existing, but he states that it has strayed from the truth because of its rejection of Jesus; and studies in religion have made the proliferation of Baptist sects in the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE the

⁶⁶ Scobie, *John the Baptist* 54.

⁶⁷ The codex reference is 1Q.S.9, lines 10–11. K. G. Kuhn, 'The Two Messiahs of Aaron and Israel', in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendal, London: SCM Press, 1958, 54–64.

⁶⁸ W. H. Brownlee, 'John the Baptist in the Light of the Ancient Scrolls', in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendal, London: SCM Press, 1958, 33–53.

⁶⁹ See n. 31.

⁷⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 132.

⁷¹ E. F. Scott, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology*, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1906, 78.

object of their research. Although valuable in its own right, this research, which derives in part from research into the Qumran scrolls, the Jewish background to the New Testament, and Sabaeen-Mandaean studies, throws light on Baha'u'llah's observation.

Although the sect is called both Sabaeen and Mandaean, the double name Sabaeen-Mandaean is sometimes used to avoid confusion. The double name persists because of the traditional quranic name *Subbā* and *al-sabi'un*, whose identity has long baffled scholars and Muslims alike, and the self-identification of present-day Iraqi Baptists as *Mandayya* ('knowers'), from their worship of the Gnostic Manda de Hayye, 'Knowledge of Life'. Whether there be a connection between the Sabaeans and the ancient Sabians of Saudi Arabia (Yemen) is unknown. They are also known by the ironic misnomer of 'Christians of St. John', ironic because of their rejection of Christ.

The identification of the Sabaeans-Mandaeans with John the Baptist is largely a Baha'i-specific usage, but a few scholars aver a direct connection. Joseph Thomas, for example, in his excellent 1935 study of the Baptist movement in ancient Palestine and Syria, makes the connection explicit between the quranic Sabaeans and the present-day Sabaeen-Mandaeans and John the Baptist, thus giving further credence to Baha'u'llah's statement.⁷² The distinguished Polish-German Semitist, Mark Lidzbarski (1868–1928), also asserted a direct connection between the Sabaeans-Mandaeans and John the Baptist. (See below in this section.)

Christopher Buck's instructive 1984 article, 'The Identity of the Sābi'ūn: An Historical Quest', makes no such identification, but his note 61 does refer the reader in passing to Baha'u'llah's assertion. Although it can perhaps be presumed, the reader is not informed that the Mandaeans claim John the Baptist as their prophet, along with Adam, Seth, and Noah. Buck probes the complex identification of the quranic *al-sābi'ūn*.⁷³ His detailed historical research traces the identity of nine different groups bearing the name 'Sabians'. His findings yield inter alia associations with two rival Baptist groups, the Mandaeans and Mani's Elchasaites, who dwelt 'in the marsh lands and delta of the lower Euphrates'. Based on previous research and his own findings, Buck reaffirms the identity of these two groups with the quranic *al-sābi'ūn*.⁷⁴ Other Sabaeans can be found in the Khuzestan region of southwest Iran, but Lady E. S. (Ethel Stafana) Drower in her *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (1937) wrote that they were 'not so prosperous or so healthy as those in Iraq'.⁷⁵

The Sabaeen-Mandaean religion is a fossilized example of the fragility of an ancient Semitic Baptist sect that has moved far from its prophetic roots. In its approximately 2300-year history, it has had historical contacts with various religions and civilizations, and has become syncretistically overlain with Zoroastrian, Manichi, Jewish, Nestorian Christian, Muslim, Gnostic, and ancient Babylonian astrological religious strata, too complex to unpack

⁷² Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste* 208. The Gorgias Theological Library has issued a reprint of the 1935 edition.

⁷³ Christopher Buck, 'The Identity of the Sābi'ūn: An Historical Quest', *The Muslim World*, 74(3–4), 1984, 172–86.

⁷⁴ Buck, *Identity* 185–6.

⁷⁵ E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends and Folklore*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962, n.p. The citation above is taken from the online extended extract, 'Mandaean Scriptures and Fragments' copied from *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*. <<http://www.gnosis.org/library/manda/dower-1937.html>> (accessed 16 July 2012). Lady Drower was a British novelist, travel-writer, anthropologist, and translator of Mandaean texts who lived for 25 years in Iraq where she did extensive field work with the *Subbā*. The online address and the author name under the title misspells 'Drower' as 'Dower', but subsequent spellings are correct.

here.⁷⁶ (Not to speak of its folklore, magic, and legends that Drower has studied in detail.) This sect, persecuted under Saddam Hussein's regime, continues to be harassed by Shiah clerics and some of their zealous followers. Their current head priest and spiritual leader (2012), Satar Jabar Helo, claims some 75,000 members, a number that is probably inflated.⁷⁷ Practising Sabaeans–Mandaeans live near Basrah in the marshy rivers of the Tigris-Euphrates delta where, clothed in white robes, they can perform their baptism rituals in relative safety.

The most well-known of the Baptist sects are, of course, the messianic Essenes of Qumran fame, but other Essene-like rival Baptist sects proliferated in ancient Palestine. Samaria seems to have been the fountainhead for the Baptist sects in the immediate pre-Christian era. According to Matthew Black, the Samaritans generated a number of anti-Pharasaic Jewish baptizer sects.⁷⁸ These included the Nasoreans ('watchers' or 'holy ones'), one of the early names of the Sabaeans, still acknowledged by today's Iraqi *Subbā*—not to be confused with the Nazarenes, the derogatory Jewish name for early Christians. Their reverence for the River Jordan and the Aramaic dialect of their scriptures indicates a Palestinian origin to the sect.⁷⁹ Other Baptist groups, who survive in name only, included the Masubthaeans, who may be the same sect as the Sabaeans, Dositheans, and Gorothenes, all obscure heterodox Jewish sects that rejected official Judaism with its temple cultus in Jerusalem, while claiming baptism as their rite of salvation. Despite the differences in name, substantive differences in practice may not have existed.

However, the connection between the Sabaeans and John the Baptist is categorical in Baha'i scripture. The followers of the Baptist are referred to explicitly by Baha'u'llah as Sabaeans (*Sabi'in*). The term '*sabi'in*' is used by Baha'u'llah in two ways: (1) to refer to the earliest of the revealed monotheistic religions in the Adamic cycle, which is perhaps of Saudi Arabian origin, and whose founder is unknown. Abraham is thought to be a follower of the Sabeaeon religion who reestablished its original monotheism that had degenerated into polytheism; (2) the followers of John the Baptist. This point was originally made by Shoghi Effendi⁸⁰ and has since been clarified by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice:

Baha'u'llah has used the term "Sabi'in" (Sabeaean) to describe two different groups: (a) the Sabi'in who trace their origins to ancient times, and are the remnants of an ancient and independent religion, the name of whose Founder is not known to us; and (b) the Sabi'in who gave their allegiance to John the Baptist, but have never accepted Jesus Christ as a Manifestation of God.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Buck mentions *Subbā* syncretism based mainly on Al-Biruni in 'The Identity of the Sābi'ūn 174–7. E. S. Drower's *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* details the Gnostic content of the Sabeaean religion but alludes to certain syncretistic elements.

⁷⁷ 'Iraq: Old Sabeaean-Mandean Community is Proud of its Ancient Faith', <<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1053864.html>> (accessed 15 July 2012). In E. S. Drower's online extended 1937 extract cited in n. 75, she gives the number of *Subbā* enumerated in the 1932 Iraqi census as 4,805, but she thought this number was an 'understatement.' I could not obtain online Iraqi government census numbers for *Subbā* living today in Iraq.

⁷⁸ Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* 73–4.

⁷⁹ See Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste* 225ff.

⁸⁰ Letter of 13 July 1938, written of behalf of Shoghi Effendi. See n. 9.

⁸¹ Personal copy of Memorandum of 7 April 1976 from the Research Department to the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice. Neither Baha'u'llah, Shoghi Effendi nor the Universal House of Justice have suggested that the ancient Sabeaean religion was of Saudi Arabian origin, nor the theory that Abraham restored ancient Sabeaean monotheism that had degenerated into polytheism. It occurred to me because of the existence of *hanufa* (sing. *hanif*) in Saudi Arabia at the time of Muhammad. While a divergence of opinion exists about the identity of the

Baha'u'llah affirmed that the followers of John 'still exist on the earth and are known by some as Sabaeans'. Further, 'These people consider themselves followers of His holiness (John the Baptist) but they have indeed remained veiled from the truth . . .'⁸²

In addition to the testimony of the Iraqi Baptists themselves, and the research of Joseph Thomas, another scholar's findings serve to corroborate Baha'u'llah's affirmation. Among his other specialties, the prolific academic Mark Lidzbarski, who converted to evangelical Christianity from Hasidic Judaism, initiated research into Mandaean literature at the beginning of the 20th century. E. S. Drower, and G. S. R. Mead, both in Gnostic perspective, also made significant contributions. Lidzbarski translated the Sabaeen-Mandaean holy books and liturgical texts and concluded that they showed a Palestinian origin and Johannine connection. His arguments are strong. Among the Sabaeen sacred writings are the earlier cosmological *Ginza* or *Ginzeraba* (Treasury), also called the Book of Adam, and the later John-Book (*Drasha-d-Yahya*) that describes the activities of John the Baptist. This literature is written in a language that resembles Palestinian Aramaic, and shows conceptual and linguistic similarities with the Samaritan Aramaic used by the Jewish sect to whom the Baptist proclaimed his mission at Aenon near Salim.

Sabaeen-Mandaean sacred writings show an ambivalent reverence for the River Jordan and Jerusalem. Jordan's waters are both extolled and denigrated. G. S. R. Mead has referred to a text that describes the Jordan as 'brackish and slow, unfit for baptism'.⁸³ This literature reflects an abhorrence of the Jews who persecuted them. The John-Book also identifies Jesus as the false Messiah, giving credence to the Baptist-Christian polemic that erupted about the year 50 CE that finds echoes in the Gospel of John. Conversely, the Christian polemic against Baptists is indicated in the noncanonical 'Homilies' (2:23–24), which form part of the heretical 'Pseudo-Clementine Writings'. They identify Simon Magus, the father of all heresy, as the chief disciple of John the Baptist.⁸⁴ A reference to Mount Carmel occurs in the John-Book. Here the so-called *Letter of Truth*, the Gnostic equivalent of the Book of Revelation, is read to the Baptist by his brothers on the sacred mount.⁸⁵

Sabaeans naturally revere John the Baptist, largely because of his baptismal ritual, but they do not regard him as their original founder. As mentioned above, baptism predated John the Baptist by centuries. As for the River Jordan, a certain ambivalence seems to characterize these writings for John the Baptist when compared to the relatively minor role he plays in their baptismal rituals. Despite their reverence for him, John's life and teachings are recounted in only a few pages. The John-Book, through the mouth of his father, Zachariah, gives John primacy among the prophets, 'Who is thy equal in Judaea; who is thy equal in Jerusalem, that I should look on him and forget thee?' 'Is there anyone greater than I?'⁸⁶ The *Ginza* depicts him as man of great beauty who performed miraculous healings, such as curing the lame, blind and deaf.⁸⁷ But despite their claim on John, he is not greatly venerated in practice. For the Sabaeans, while John may be a 'prophet', he serves more like a great teacher, but especially

hanufa, with some writers associating them with Christians and Jews, another theory says that they claimed to be monotheist followers of Abraham, not Christians or Jews. N. 65 refers to Muhammad's declared intention to restore the pure monotheism of Abraham.

⁸² These extracts from Baha'u'llah's tablet are quoted by Fazel-i-Mazandarani, in *Asraru'l-Áthar* (A Glossary of Baha'i Terms), Tehran: Bahá'í National Publishing Trust, 1972, 4:233. The Research Department, in a memorandum to the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice (7 April 1976), vouches for the accuracy of the translation.

⁸³ G. R. S. Mead, *John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, London: John M. Watkins, 1924, 9.

⁸⁴ Scobie, *John the Baptist* 192–3.

⁸⁵ Mead, *John the Baptizer* 47.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 44, 47.

⁸⁷ M. N. Siouffi, *Études sur la Religion des Soubbas ou Sabéens: Leurs Dogmes, Leurs Moeurs* (Studies of the Religion of the Subbas or Sabaeans: Their Dogmas, Their Customs), Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880, 8–9.

as the supreme *ganzibra*, the model chief-priest who conducts baptismal rituals. As Buck's article showed, the question of the exact historical origins of the Sabaeans-Mandaeans is vexed. Among others, two theories have emerged: One theory has it that probably during the ministry of John the Baptist, the Sabaeans-Mandaeans adopted him as their prophet and left Palestine for Mesopotamia as a result of the persecution of the Jews and/or the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.⁸⁸ Another theory, referred to by E. S. Drower, citing the great Muslim scholar and polymath, the Persian Al-Biruni, writing at the beginning of the 11th century CE, says that the original Sabaeans are 'remnants of the Jewish tribes who remained in Babylonia when the other tribes left it for Jerusalem in the days of Cryus and Artaxerxes. These remaining tribes . . . adopted a system mixed up of Magism and Judaism.'⁸⁹

John in the Quran and the Hadith: The Sinless Recipient of a Book

Both the Quran and the hadith provide some original statements which substantiate my thesis that Yahya deserves special consideration as a minor prophet. The Quran makes three mentions of 'Yahya, son of Zachariah'. The holy book highlights John's miraculous birth, but unlike the Gospel gives no subsequent account of his history and teachings. The Quran makes two significant statements about John's prophethood, although the two statements are not easily reconciled. The hadiths, however, present us with a contrasting picture of John. The oral traditions reveal that John the Baptist enjoyed a high station and particular veneration among Muslims.

One of the quranic references to Yahya would appear to vex a clear understanding of John's prophetic station. The verse concerns John's relationship to the book: 'We said: "O John! receive the Book with purpose of heart:"—and We bestowed on him wisdom while yet a child.' (19:12). This verse appears to be designating John as the recipient of a sacred book, a feature that is usually reserved in traditional Islam for the *rasul*, messenger or apostle, the independent manifestation of God. Nevertheless, exegetes of the Quran do not admit the verse at face value, i.e., that John was the recipient of a special revelation. They have concluded that the book in question is the Torah and that John is being bidden only to confirm and proclaim Jewish law.⁹⁰ The conclusion that Yahya is being exhorted only to confirm the Torah is based on Sura 3:39, which states, 'God announceth John to thee, who shall be a verifier of the word from God, and a great one, chaste, and a prophet of the number of the just.' (Rodwell translates 'verifier' for 'confirmer'.) As we shall see below (n. 102), Baha'u'llah gives a different interpretation of the 'word'.

When we turn to the hadith, however, Yahya emerges as a more fully transcendent figure. Although not all Islamic traditions are authoritative for Baha'is,⁹¹ intentionally doctrinaire purposes would not appear to be served by these particular oral traditions. One hadith, for example, attributes sinlessness to him: 'None, among the prophets, will appear before Allah without having committed some sin, except John, son of Zachariah'.⁹² To make sense of this statement, we have to bear in mind the well-known distinction made in traditional Islam between the *rasul*

⁸⁸The argument was Lidzbarski's in 'Mandäische Fragen', in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 1927, 26: 70–5. His arguments were summarized by Joseph Thomas in *Le Mouvement Baptiste*. Lidzbarski's German text was not available to me. The reference to the Sabaeans moving to Mesopotamia at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem is in Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste* 211.

⁸⁹ Al-Biruni, cited by Drower in *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* xvii.

⁹⁰ Andrew Rippen, 'John the Baptist', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol.3, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003, 51–3. See also, Andrew Rippen, 'Yaḥyā b. Zakariyyā', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., Brill Online, 2012. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/yahya-b-zakariyya-SIM_7956 (accessed 9 July 2012)

⁹¹ I approach this subject with diffidence, but at a minimum, we can say that those hadith that are favourably quoted by the three central figures of the Baha'i faith can be considered to be authoritative.

⁹² Unidentified source quoted by Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet* 384.

(messenger), corresponding to the Baha'i notion of a major prophet, and the *nabi* (prophet), corresponding to the lesser or minor prophet. In Islam, the *rasul* is exclusively sinless, one of the marks that distinguishes him from the *nabi*. Since Islam does not recognize John as *rasul*, it would appear that some special distinction is being applied in this hadith to the Baptist as *nabi*, i.e., none among the minor prophets is sinless, except John the Baptist. In Sufism, both John and Jesus have served as models for Sufi piety. The attribute of sinlessness would qualify them for such veneration.

A statement of 'Abdu'l-Baha helps to clarify the hadith. He comments that although 'essential infallibility' is reserved for those major prophets 'endowed with constancy', he maintains nonetheless that 'conferred infallibility' has also been granted to 'holy beings'. This distinction presumably includes the minor prophets: 'Although these souls have not essential infallibility, still they are under the protection of God—that is to say, God preserves them from error'.⁹³ Since sin is by definition moral error, it follows logically that freedom from error also includes freedom from sin.

When the time later came that Muslim poets, jurists, and grammarians had become preoccupied with assigning categories (*tabaqat*) to the company of the prophetic figures found in the Quran, one hadith places John at the head of the list before finally resting upon Muhammad.⁹⁴ In those traditions gathered by Al-Bukhari (d. 850 CE), which along with those gathered by Muslim, are judged to be most accurate or sound (*sahih*), we find John again in the company of the great messengers. Muhammad meets Adam, Abraham, Moses, John, and Jesus during his famous Miraj or night journey. In this tradition, which conveys something of the mystical affinity of the prophetic figures, Muhammad greets both John and Jesus together in the second heaven.⁹⁵ This is another indication of the close familial association of John and Jesus mentioned above.

Tabari also relates that John is the first to believe in Jesus,⁹⁶ the parallel to the Bab's being the first to believe in Baha'u'llah.⁹⁷ Elsewhere in the hadith, John is depicted as being *sayyid* (lord) of science and virtue;⁹⁸ cf. the Quran, 'and we bestowed on him wisdom while yet a child' (19:12). Furthermore, in Islam the presence of the angel Gabriel presiding at the birth of a prophet is given as one of the criteria distinguishing the *rasul* from the *nabi*.⁹⁹ Although the Quran, unlike the gospel, makes no mention of Gabriel presiding at John's birth, still the 'angels' proclaim to Zachariah the birth of his son John, as 'he [Zachariah] stood praying in the sanctuary' (3:32).

John the Baptist in the Baha'i Faith

The main thrust of my argument is based, of course, on the Baha'i perspective. I have partially quoted above Baha'u'llah's reference to John the Baptist from the *Kitáb-i-Badí* brought to notice by Kazem Kazemzadeh: 'I swear by God that the Manifestation of the Primal Point [the Báb] and this most luminous, most wondrous Manifestation [Bahá'u'lláh] are exactly like (*ayn be ayn*) the appearance of John, son of Zachariah, and the Spirit of God [Rúhu'lláh—Jesus] . . .'¹⁰⁰

⁹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 171.

⁹⁴ Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet* 384.

⁹⁵ Al-Bukhari, *L'Authentique Tradition Musulmane: Choix de Hadiths* (The Authentic Muslim Tradition: Selection of Hadiths), trans. G.H. Bosquet, Paris: Grasset, 1964, 26, no. 62.

⁹⁶ In Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, Oxford: OneWorld, 1995, 58.

⁹⁷ 'I Myself am but the first servant to believe in Him and in His signs, and to partake of the sweet savors of His words from the first-fruits of the Paradise of His knowledge. Yea, by His glory! He is the Truth'. The Bab, quoted in Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 140.

⁹⁸ Tabari, *Tafsir*, 3: 157, quoted by Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet* 384.

⁹⁹ Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet* 83, 340.

¹⁰⁰ Kazemzadeh, 'Oriental Scholarship', letter to *World Order*, (2), Winter 1974–75, 4.

Kazemzadeh also quotes passages about John from Baha'u'llah's *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* and the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. These passages are reproduced respectively as follows: 'They that have turned aside from Me have spoken even as the followers of John (the Baptist) spoke. For they, too, protested against Him Who was the Spirit (Jesus) saying: "The dispensation of John hath not yet ended; wherefore hast thou come?"'¹⁰¹ The following sentence is quoted from *Íqán*, but it has been truncated by Kazemzadeh. In it Baha'u'llah is quoting the Quran (3:39): 'God announceth Yayha [John] to thee, who shall bear witness unto the Word from God . . .'¹⁰² Here is the fuller context: 'Even as He hath revealed: "God announceth Yahya to thee, who shall bear witness unto the Word from God, and a great one and chaste'. By the term "Word" is meant Jesus, Whose coming Yahya foretold.'¹⁰³ The *Kitáb-i-Badí* also states: 'John appeared before Jesus, proclaiming his [John's] prophethood, and all sects of Islám recognize him as a prophet; and he came with laws and commandments . . .'¹⁰⁴

I return to the point of John's being bidden in the Quran to 'receive the Book with purpose of heart' (19:12). The distinguished Ishraq-i-Khavari, in his *Qamús-i-Íqán* (Commentary on the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*), alludes to John's book. Khavari writes in his summary of John the Baptist:

In the Qur'an, in the Sura of Mary, the story of the birth of John as a result of his elderly parents' wishes for a child, and the tidings from God to Zachariah that he would be favoured with a son who should be named Yahya, and also that John had a Book, and prophethood (*nubuvvat*), is detailed.¹⁰⁵

It is not entirely clear whether or not Khavari is accepting the quranic statement literally, i.e., that John was the recipient of a new scripture, but nowhere does the great scholar suggest that John was an independent manifestation of God. In any case, even if one reads the quranic verse as evidence that Yahya was the recipient of a holy book, rather than being bidden to observe and proclaim the Torah, as Muslim exegetes would have it, it would not justify the conclusion that because John had a 'book', ergo, he was an independent prophet. The word *book* does not ipso facto point to independent prophethood. In Arabic, the fluid word *kitab*, although it sometimes refers to a revelation brought by the major prophets, can also simply mean an inspired message.¹⁰⁶ Seen in this light, it is not the independent manifestations exclusively who bring a book. The *contents* of the book are rather the decisive factors in determining the prophet's station. A crucial point here is that John did not abrogate any laws of the Torah; the laws and teachings of his dispensation were all Judaic, even though he radically reformed baptism to make it an instrument of messianic repentance and righteousness.

Nowhere in his writings does Baha'u'llah declare that John the Baptist is a major prophet 'endowed with constancy', and nowhere in his utterances does John make such a claim, pleading only servitude to Christ and his own heraldic mission. In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, despite the '*nabi va*

¹⁰¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 157, quoted by Kazemzadeh in *World Order* 4.

¹⁰² With this interpretation, Baha'u'llah is removing any ambiguity regarding the meaning of the 'word'. He says that Muhammad intended the divine 'Word', i.e., Christ.

¹⁰³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 64.

¹⁰⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Badí* 159, quoted by Kazemzadeh in *World Order* 4.

¹⁰⁵ Ishraq-i-Khavari, 'Manifestation of Yahya, Son of Zachariah', *Qamús-i-Íqán* (Commentary on the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*), Tehran: National Publishing Trust, BE 128, 984–8 at 986. My notes of some 30 years ago contain the entire English translation of Khavari's treatment of the Baptist in the handwriting of the translator, but I did not record the translator's name.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Madigan thinks that the Quran does not uphold the usual distinction between the *rusul* as the bringer of a canonical text and the *anbiya'* as conveyers of an oral message. Madigan, 'Book,' *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001, 246.

rasul' distinction made by Baha'u'llah in the *Kitáb-i-Badí* and cited by Kazemzadeh, Baha'u'llah speaks of John only in his role of forerunner, conforming to the quranic usage.¹⁰⁷

Baha'u'llah's dual reference (see n. 25) to John as 'prophet and messenger' suggests that as prophet John foretold the coming of Christ and enforced the Mosaic law. As messenger John brought a 'book', i.e., teachings that included laws, teachings and commandments: 'and he came with laws and commandments.' This status would in itself distinguish him from the other minor prophets of Israel and Judah, justifying Christ's statement that John was 'more than a prophet.' Kazemzadeh, also refers to an unnamed tablet cited by Ishraq-i-Khavari, and he quotes the following text regarding John as 'having the station of prophethood [*Nubuvvat*], in spite of the greatness of that station proclaimed to man the glad tidings of the Manifestation of the Spirit [Jesus]. . .'¹⁰⁸

Two other mentions of John are found, one in the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, not cited by Kazemzadeh, and one from *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*. Both references reinforce the familiar analogy between John and the Bab:

John, son of Zacharias, said what My Forerunner hath said: 'Saying, repent ye, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He that cometh after Me is mightier than I, Whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.' Wherefore, hath My Forerunner, as a sign of submissiveness and humility, said: 'The whole of the Bayan is only a leaf amongst the leaves of His Paradise.'¹⁰⁹

In his tablet to Pope Pius IX, Baha'u'llah identifies John and the Bab as forerunners and proclaimers of the promised coming revelation:

O followers of the Son! We have once again sent John unto you, and He, verily, hath cried out in the wilderness of the Bayán: O peoples of the world! Cleanse your eyes! The Day whereon ye can behold the Promised One and attain unto Him hath drawn nigh! O followers of the Gospel! Prepare the way! The Day of the advent of the Glorious Lord is at hand! Make ready to enter the Kingdom. Thus hath it been ordained by God, He Who causeth the dawn to break.¹¹⁰

In chapter four of his book, *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels: A New Dialogue*, Daniel Grolin examines the baptism of John from within a Baha'i-informed Christian perspective, a book that was favourably reviewed by Christopher Buck.¹¹¹ Grolin aims to promote a fresh, scholarly based approach to Baha'i-Christian dialogue, one that will reach the general, intelligent reader. (The specifically Baha'i interpretation and invitation to dialogue are confined entirely to Appendixes I and II.) Although Grolin makes no mention of his Baha'i-Christian dialogue intention in the introduction, Jens Buchwald Andersen, University Chaplain of the University of Southern Denmark, Odense, alludes to this purpose in the conclusion of his foreword.

Grolin examines the four gospel accounts of John and presents him as an apocalyptic preacher and prophet, but more recently he has questioned the validity of the distinction between apocalypse and eschatology.¹¹² Grolin has concluded that the Gospel account of the Baptist is more reliable than Josephus, the other source of information about John. But he finds that Josephus is 'less reliable'; the Jewish historian's presentation of the execution of John for the

¹⁰⁷ In the same context, Baha'u'llah mentions that John is 'the sign in the invisible heaven' that accompanied the visible sign of the messianic Star of Bethlehem. The Quran corroborates the gospel where John appears as the witness and confirmer of the Christ-Logos (John 1:34).

¹⁰⁸ Ishraq-i-Khavari, *Qamús* 2: 186–7; cited by Kazemzadeh in *World Order* 4.

¹⁰⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 157.

¹¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002, 63.

¹¹¹ Christopher Buck, *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 11, 2003, 108–12.

¹¹² This point was clarified in a 12 July 2012 e-mail to this author.

reason of righteousness alone is merely a ‘convenient portrayal’. As a Jew, Josephus had no love for Herod Antipas, and his account lacks ‘verisimilitude’. The Gospel account presents the more authentically religious portrayal of John’s martyrdom.¹¹³

Grolin’s chapter two, ‘The Jewish Context’, distinguishes between the warning ‘oracle prophet’ who makes dire predictions and the ‘action prophet’ who performs a miracle, like the ‘prophets of old’. John the Baptist falls into the former category, and Moses and Jesus into the latter.¹¹⁴ To use Max Weber’s priest-prophet typology, Grolin has correctly pointed out that prophetic religion, which is based on an intensely personal, charismatic revelation, accompanied by teachings and/or the divine command, largely sets itself against the priests who serve the vested interests of a long-established sacred tradition. In proclaiming a ‘single rite of salvation’¹¹⁵ (baptism) to the Jews, John the Baptist asserted strong prophetic authority over all Israel. He thus defied the Jewish status quo: the Jerusalem-based cultus upheld by the Sadducees, who controlled temple sacrifice and the Sanhedrin, and the fierce defenders of the written Torah and the oral law, the non-priestly, lay party of the Pharisees. The hostility between the Sadducees and Pharisees was based on the Sadducean rejection of the oral law (Mishnah).

Turning now to the interpretations of Shoghi Effendi and the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice, we find that these authoritative writings rule out any possible designation of John the Baptist as an independent manifestation of God. Shoghi Effendi’s two lengthy commentaries are reproduced here in full:

Dearly-beloved friends! That the Báb, the inaugurator of the Bábí Dispensation, is fully entitled to rank as one of the self-sufficient Manifestations of God, that He has been invested with sovereign power and authority, and exercises all the rights and prerogatives of independent Prophethood, is yet another fundamental verity which the Message of Bahá’u’lláh insistently proclaims and which its followers must uncompromisingly uphold. That He is not to be regarded merely as an inspired Precursor of the Bahá’í Revelation, that in His person, as He Himself bears witness in the Persian Bayán, the object of all the Prophets gone before Him has been fulfilled, is a truth which I feel it my duty to demonstrate and emphasize. We would assuredly be failing in our duty to the Faith we profess and would be violating one of its basic and sacred principles if in our words or by our conduct we hesitate to recognize the implications of this root principle of Bahá’í belief, or refuse to uphold unreservedly its integrity and demonstrate its truth. Indeed the chief motive actuating me to undertake the task of editing and translating Nabil’s immortal Narrative has been to enable every follower of the Faith in the West to better understand and more readily grasp the tremendous implications of His exalted station and to more ardently admire and love Him.¹¹⁶

To argue that John the Baptist is an independent Manifestation of God would compromise, then, this unique feature of the Bab’s station. In another commentary that strongly suggests an implied comparison with John the Baptist, Shoghi Effendi has explained further:

Not only in the character of the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, however stupendous be His claim, does the greatness of this Dispensation reside. For among the distinguishing features of His Faith ranks, as a further evidence of its uniqueness, the fundamental truth that in the person of its Forerunner, the Báb, every follower of Bahá’u’lláh recognizes not merely an inspired annunciator but a direct Manifestation of God. It is their firm belief that, no matter how short the duration of His Dispensation, and however brief the period of the operation of His laws, the Báb had been endowed with a potency such as no founder of any of the past religions was, in the providence of the Almighty, allowed to possess. That He was not merely the precursor of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, that He was more than a divinely-inspired personage, that His was the station of an independent, self-

¹¹³ Ibid., from Grolin’s own summary.

¹¹⁴ Daniel Grolin, *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels: A New Dialogue*, Oxford: George Ronald, 2002, 36.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 89.

¹¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 119.

sufficient Manifestation of God, is abundantly demonstrated by Himself, is affirmed in unmistakable terms by Bahá'u'lláh, and is finally attested by the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.¹¹⁷

If this were not enough, the following passage makes Shoghi Effendi's interpretation ironclad:

To many of the friends the Báb has been a mere fore-runner of Bahá'u'lláh and they have ignored His station as Manifestation of God . . . The greatness of this Cause is in this: That whereas in the previous Dispensations there was the appearance of only one prophet, in this glorious dispensation there is a twin manifestation, the second being infinitely greater than all the previous manifestations.¹¹⁸

The Universal House of Justice has clarified the law-giving nature of John's dispensation. While it confirms, as attested by Baha'u'llah, that John brought 'laws and commandments', it makes the important qualification that the Baptist did not abrogate any of the Mosaic laws:

It must be remembered, however, that while the Jews were called to repentance and were given teachings aimed at a betterment of their spiritual lives before and in preparation for the Mission of the promised Messiah, these teachings of John did not abrogate any of the laws of the Mosaic dispensation, as was the case with Jesus Christ.¹¹⁹

The other point clarified by the Universal House of Justice concerns John's community. The existence of a community of followers, it observes, cannot in itself lead to the conclusion that he was an independent manifestation of God: 'You of course also realize that the fact that John the Baptist has a community of followers, is no indication that He was an independent Manifestation of God.' The Universal House of Justice points to the existence of the Shaykhis, the followers of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i, as being of no account in his being a manifestation of God.¹²⁰

But the mystical unity of the prophets, despite separative, categorical theological judgments, transcends such distinctions. Baha'u'llah has identified John the Baptist with himself as one of Baha'u'llah's previous manifestations. In this passage, we find John in the company of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Joseph, and Imam Husayn, who were all destined to suffer by divine decree: 'And again Thou didst decree that I be beheaded by the sword of the infidel.' Shoghi Effendi interprets this as being a reference to John the Baptist.¹²¹ While Joseph figures among the 25 prophets mentioned in the Quran (6:84) whose story is recounted in Sura 12, Shoghi Effendi has clarified that prophetic status does not apply to Imam Husayn, despite the greatness of his station.¹²² Consequently, the unity of the prophets cannot be restricted exclusively to the category of major prophets. Prophetic unity would seem to be based on a more diffuse and mysterious relationship that transcends the two classes of prophets, since both major and minor, and even non-prophets (Imam Husayn), are included in Baha'u'llah's reference to the unity of the divine manifestations as reflections of his own person.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 60.

¹¹⁸ This quotation has been excerpted from an undated letter of Shoghi Effendi and quoted by the Universal House of Justice in its reply of 24 August 1975 to an individual who had asked for a clarification about the station of John the Baptist. The Universal House of Justice noted that the passage was from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, but the House does not indicate the date of the Guardian's reply, and I have not been able to locate it elsewhere. In this passage 'the appearance of only one prophet' must refer to a major or independent prophet.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Letter dated 24 August 1975 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual as in n. 119.

¹²¹ 'As to the list of the prophets with whom Bahá'u'lláh identifies Himself in the passage found on pages 26 and 27 of "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" their names are as follows: Abraham, Moses, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, Imam Husayn, on whom Bahá'u'lláh has conferred and exceptionally exalted station (and) the Báb.' From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 7 August 1936, in *Lights of Guidance* 476, no. 1567.

¹²² *Lights of Guidance* 499, no. 1673.

Seeing ‘Eye to Eye’: Parallels Between the John-Jesus and Bab-Baha’u’llah Dispensations

Based on Baha’u’llah’s emphatic comparison, I have alluded above to certain similarities between the dispensations of John and Jesus and that of the Bab and Baha’u’llah. Here I would like to gather and summarize these parallels, while suggesting a few others. Baha’u’llah’s *ayn be ayn* metaphor, however, should be treated with scientific caution and respect. It remains a remarkable comparison, but not a perfect parallel equation:

1. Like the Bab, who prepared the coming of Baha’u’llah, John had to smash the stronghold of a fanatical, corrupt, and powerful clergy to prepare the way for Jesus;¹²³
2. Strict laws and stern piety governed John’s followers in their preparation for Jesus, just as they had done in the Bab’s preparation for Baha’u’llah;
3. A minority of Baptists rejected Jesus, just as a small minority of Babis had rejected Baha’u’llah;
4. Gospel evidence exists for a Baptist-Christian polemic, just as some Babis and Baha’is engaged in polemics over the station and mission of their respective founders;
5. The seed of the Christian community was sown among John’s followers, just as the early Baha’i community sprang largely from among the Bab’s followers;
6. John was the first to believe in Jesus, just as the Bab was the first believer in Baha’u’llah;
7. Jesus taught the cause of John and submitted to his law, just as Baha’u’llah taught the Bab’s religion and submitted to his law before Baha’u’llah’s prophetic awakening;
8. The Baptist-Christian, Babi-Baha’i dispensations followed one another in close succession;
9. John the Baptist began the Christian cycle and dispensation just as the Bab began the Baha’i cycle and dispensation;
10. Both John the Baptist and the Bab were imprisoned in mountain prison-fortresses—John the Baptist in Machaerus and the Bab in Mah-Ku and Chiriq;
11. A strong parallel exists in the historical line of development of both dispensations from sect to world religion: Essene-Baptist-Christian and Shaykhi-Babi-Baha’i.

Can Lexical Distinctions Determine Prophet Categories?

One of the basic *prima facie* theses of this article is that the determination of John’s prophetic station—or of any other prophet for that matter—cannot be based solely on lexical distinctions between *nabi* and *rasul* in the Baha’i writings. For if we argue that the designation *rasul* is reserved exclusively for the independent prophets, as it tends to be in the Quran, *ergo* John the Baptist would have to be categorized among the major prophets, since Baha’u’llah has designated him as *rasul*. However, despite his *rasul* epithet, John belongs to the minor prophets. Generally, in Shoghi Effendi’s English translations of Baha’i scripture, the words *messenger* and *prophet* are applied interchangeably to both major and minor prophets, much as we find in the Quran. Consequently, any determinations between the major and minor prophetic categories would have to be made on the basis of the Bab’s and Baha’u’llah’s writings, ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s statements on the two classes of prophets, and any interpretations by Shoghi Effendi, not on

¹²³ The point was fully explained by Shoghi Effendi in his messages to India. In a letter of 17 February 1939 entitled by the editor, ‘Reason of Severe Laws Revealed by the Báb’, he fully develops this point. Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day: Messages to India, 1923–1957*, New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust of India 77–8. The publication is undated, but the preface by Dr. R. Muhajir is dated 9 March 1970.

nomenclature alone. If Shoghi Effendi's list of major prophets in the Adamic cycle cited in n. 9 is considered to be definitive, then the list of actual names of the major prophets is reduced to 8 because the founder of the Sabaeen religion is unknown.

In Baha'i usage, 'manifestation of God/divine manifestation' certainly *tends* to designate the independent prophets, those divine manifestations whose coming is prophesied in scripture in a covenantal relationship, who bring a 'book', institute new laws that abrogate the laws of a previous dispensation, and found a new religion.¹²⁴ In that sense, this key term has both clarified and simplified the question. But even a cursory examination of Baha'i scripture shows that the *mazhar-i-ilahi* has not entirely replaced the time-honoured usage of *nabi* and *rasul* by Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi alike.

An excursus into the supreme station of Baha'u'llah is pertinent here. Fazel and Fananpazir have maintained that Baha'u'llah never refers to himself as either *nabi* or *rasul* in his writings: concepts such as 'prophet' and 'messenger' have been transcended.¹²⁵ This transcendence is presumably based on Baha'u'llah's declaration, uncited by the authors: 'This Day, however, is unique, and is to be distinguished from those that have preceded it. The designation "Seal of the Prophets" fully revealeth its high station. The Prophetic Cycle hath, verily, ended. The Eternal Truth is now come.'¹²⁶ Assuming Fazel and Fanapazir are correct in their assertion that Baha'u'llah never refers to himself as *nabi* or *rausl*, Shoghi Effendi's interpretations cast a different light on this matter. The Guardian does indeed refer to Baha'u'llah as a 'prophet'. His doing so indicates that we cannot so easily dispense with this name that is deeply imbedded in thousands of years of prophetic history. Here are just two examples among several: 'There are no Prophets, so far, in the same category as Bahá'u'lláh, as He culminates a great cycle begun by Adam.'¹²⁷ 'As regards your question: Bahá'u'lláh is, of course, not God and not the Creator; but through Him we can know God, and because of this position of Divine Intermediary, in a sense, He is all (or the other Prophets) we can never know of that Infinite Essence which is God. Therefore, we address ourselves in prayer and thought to Him or through Him to that Infinite Essence behind and beyond Him.'¹²⁸

John the Baptist's Atypical Paradigm: A Summary

John the Baptist belongs to the category of minor prophets for the following reasons: he did not abrogate any of the laws of Judaism; he explicitly denied messiahship and claimed nothing but servitude to the Christ; Shoghi Effendi's categorical determination of the unique dual function of the Bab's prophethood (forerunner and independent manifestation) eliminates John the Baptist from the category of independent prophet. However, the following anomalies suggest that within the category of minor prophets distinctions must be observed for the Baptist. For these reasons, John would rank at the high point of the dependent prophets:

1. His coming and martyrdom were prophesied in scripture;
2. The angel Gabriel announced his birth, which was miraculous;

¹²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'The Two Classes of Prophets', *Some Answered Questions* 164–5.

¹²⁵ Fazel and Fananpazir, *A Bahá'i Approach* 31.

¹²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 60.

¹²⁷ Letter of 26 December 1941 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'is Australia and New Zealand, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 472, no. 1550.

¹²⁸ From a letter of 4 June 1951, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 472, no. 1553.

3. As the return of Elijah the priest-prophet, he was regarded as a Messiah-figure in his own right, who would grant salvation and remission of sins and turn all Israel to righteousness;
4. He prepared the entire Jewish people for the coming of Messiah and restored quintessential Judaism;
5. He prophesied, brought laws, teachings, and commandments that can be regarded as his 'book';
6. Jesus describes him as being 'more than a prophet';
7. The Quran and hadith describe him as being sinless and 'lord of science and virtue' and possessing wisdom in childhood. These are attributes usually associated with the independent manifestations;
8. In one description of Baha'u'llah's unity of the prophets, in the transfiguration of Jesus, and with Muhammad's night-journey, he keeps company with the major prophets;
9. Baha'u'llah designates him as being both 'prophet and messenger' (*nabi va rasul*);
10. Baha'u'llah wrote that the Baptist was the 'the sign in the invisible heaven' that accompanied the visible messianic Star of Bethlehem;
11. His community of followers, the Sabaeans-Mandaeans, still exists;
12. The Sabaean holy book the *Ginza* attributes miracles to John, such as healing the lame, blind, and deaf.

Conclusion

While no suggestion has been made above to alter the 'independent/ follower' prophetic categories assigned by 'Abdu'l-Baha, nonetheless, I have presented John the Baptist as an anomalous case that cannot be relegated simplistically to the category of minor prophet. Viewed in the perspective of prophetic categories, the exclusive either-or, independent-follower, major-minor distinctions present puzzling ambiguities where John is concerned. The fossilized state of present-day syncretistic Sabaeanism-Mandaeism in Iraq shows the fragility of a religion when it strays far from its prophetic roots and rejects its promised Messiah. The case of John's prophethood leads us to make subtler distinctions in the points of recognition used to distinguish major from minor manifestations of God because he presents certain characteristics of the independent prophets that do not usually belong to the follower prophets. His paradigm cautions us to be aware that where the prophets are concerned, undifferentiated, black-and-white, either-or determinations, while useful and valid at a fundamental level, are limited if and when finer distinctions can be substantiated. In any case, the mystical unity of the prophets transcends such rigid distinctions and reminds us to accept the limitations imposed on rational analysis. The prophet does indeed prove to be, as Baha'u'llah asserts, 'this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being.'¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 74.