

Messianic Concealment and Theophanic Disclosure

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Abstract

In this paper, I start by discussing a controversy that has erupted recently over the issue of the exact point in time that Baha'u'llah became aware of his mission. The controversy revolves around the translation of a phrase in the writings of Baha'u'llah which appear to state that he does not have any "amr". One side to the controversy claims that the translation of this phrase indicates that Baha'u'llah had no thought of advancing any claim as late as 1857, while the opposing party contends that this is a mistranslation of the phrase and that Baha'u'llah was fully aware of his mission from at least the time of his imprisonment in the Siyah-Chal. I intend to show in this paper that the whole controversy is an illusory one caused by the specific nature of the meaning of the word "amr" and that the phrase that is the subject of dispute proves neither side's case, however it is translated. Evolving out of my discussion of this issue, is a theological schematic of the stages of the evolution of the mission of those persons that Baha'is call Manifestations of God. I then putatively impose this schematic upon the dispensation of the Bab creating a new interpretation of his ministry.

In recent years, a disagreement has emerged among scholars about the exact meaning of a particular phrase in Baha'u'llah's work, the *Sahifih-yi-Shattiyih* (Book of the River or Book of the Tigris), and the evidence that it might contain about Baha'u'llah's thinking at the stage in his ministry to which this work can be dated.

On the one hand, Cole contends that, from his translation of a certain phrase the Book of the River, it is clear that, at the time that he composed this work (which Cole dates to about 1857), Baha'u'llah "is making no claim to have a divine Cause"¹. Cole states that he believes that it was not until about 1859 that Baha'u'llah began to put forward a claim and that the Book of the River is evidence that, in 1857, Baha'u'llah had no thought of such a claim. This view is opposed by Saiedi who states that Cole's translation of a particular phrase is incorrect. Saiedi argues that Baha'u'llah was fully conscious of his mission and station during the Baghdad period and rejects any suggestion that Baha'u'llah's consciousness evolved in this regard².

¹ Juan R. I. Cole, "[The Book of the Tigris](#)"

² Saiedi, "Concealment and Revelation in Baha'u'llah's Book of the River" *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, 9/3 (1999) 25-56 and *Logos and Civilisation*, Bethesda, 2000, 29-33

The key area in dispute revolves around the translation of a phrase which occurs in the *Sahifah-yi-Shattiyyih*. The sentence in which this phrase occurs may be transliterated thus: "Walakin, chih guyam, kih hich iqbal bih amri nadaram." The first part of this sentence, "Walakin, chih guyam," is in idiomatic Persian formulation expressive of despair or frustration. Saeidi has rendered it "Yet, alas", while Cole has translated it more literally "But what shall I say?" The difference of opinion focusses however upon the meaning of the second half of this sentence. The literally word-for-word rendering of this phrase would be "no approach to any amr do I have". Cole has considered that the word amr has "the connotation of `divine Cause'"³ and thus this phrase is an indication that Baha'u'llah, at this stage, had no idea of advancing a claim to a divine mission. Saeidi responds by asserting that this phrase is "a common polite Persian idiom which indicates reluctance or disinclination to approach an issue or engage in a task"⁴ Saeidi therefore disputes Cole's conclusion that this phrase indicates that Baha'u'llah conceived of no divine mission at this stage.

Part of Saeidi's argument is that the context within which this phrase appears makes his interpretation the more likely one. In the preceding paragraphs, Baha'u'llah is likening divine revelation to a river and divine omnipotence to the power of a river when it floods. The sentence in question appears at the end of this discourse, just after Baha'u'llah has stated that if it were not for the malice in people's hearts, he would continue his theme and disclose all of the spiritual meanings inherent in this analogy of the river. Saeidi argues that it is clear from the context that Baha'u'llah is using this sentence to terminate this discourse, thus making Saeidi's translation more likely. To demonstrate this argument, I will here give the translations of both Cole and Saeidi of the passage in which the disputed phrase occurs:

"If it were not for fear of the hidden chains in the breasts of the people, I would have continued to mirror forth all divine parables and subtleties of the celestial laws with reference to the very flowing of this physical river. But what shall I say? I make no claim to a Cause. The intensity of the sorrow and grief that have befallen me during these days has left me sorely tried between the Gog of silence and the Magog of speech. I beseech God to send down an Alexander who will erect a protecting wall. Hidden allusions have been concealed in these phrases and sacred letters have been treasured up in these words. Happy are those who have grasped these pearls, have appreciated their value, and have attained their presence."⁵

Were it not for fear of the malice hidden in the hearts, I would have assuredly unveiled all the inmost divine analogies and all the subtleties of the heavenly principles with regard to the course of this outward river. Yet, alas, I am disinclined to approach any matter. On account of the intensity of

³ e-mail on H-Bahai list, 20 October 2001

⁴ Saeidi, *Concealment*, p. 35.

⁵ Juan R. I. Cole, *Tigris*

My anguish and sorrow, in these days I am sore tried between the Gog of silence and the Magog of utterance. I beseech God to send down an Alexander who will raise an insurmountable barrier.⁶

Cole has recently countered Saeidi's contextual argument by finding another passage in the writings of Baha'u'llah from the same period in which a similar phrase appears: "ma`lum va mubarhan ast kih in bandih az khud dhikri va amri nadarad"⁷. In this passage, Baha'u'llah states that, should Baha'u'llah's name be mentioned, this would not become a cause of contention, because he has not put forward with respect to himself any mention or amr⁸. Cole claims that these two occurrences are cognates of each other and hence refute Saeidi's contextual argument (since the context of the second occurrence is completely different).

Cole has also supported his argument by pointing out that at the beginning of the *Sahifih-yi-Shattiyyih*, Baha'u'llah rejects any claim that he has performed any miracles although he asserts that the claims that the Bab and the Mirrors (mirat, a station given by the Bab to some of his leading disciples) of the Babi dispensation performed miracles should not be doubted. Cole maintains that this is evidence that Baha'u'llah was, at this time, subordinating himself to the Mirrors of the Babi dispensation, and is thus further evidence that he was not claiming any station for himself.

Cole's conclusions from all of this is that there is no historical evidence for Baha'u'llah putting forward a claim to a divine mission before 1859 when there are accounts by such people as Fitnih and Nabil-i Akbar that Baha'u'llah intimated such a claim to them⁹. Cole rejects the evidence that Baha'u'llah's account of his experience in the Siyah-Chal constitutes an experience of divine revelation (wahy), rather he states that "it appears that it consisted more of ilham or inspiration than of wahy or revelation, and that Baha'u'llah began thinking of islah or reform of Babism rather than of making any claim of his own"¹⁰. Cole thus maintains that the notion of claiming a divine mission did not occur to Baha'u'llah until sometime after about 1857 and before 1859.

Saeidi has presented a number of other pieces of evidence to support his position that Baha'u'llah was aware of his station and mission since at least the Siyah-Chal experience and possibly earlier. In affirmation of the fact that Baha'u'llah considered the Siyah-Chal experience of 1852-3 to be revelation (rather than inspiration as Cole claims), Saeidi quotes several references to this episode in the writings of Baha'u'llah. Of particular interest is the

6 Nader Saiedi, "Sahifiy-i-Shattiyyih (Book of the River) Revealed by Baha'u'llah: a Provisional Translation" *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, 9/3 (1999) 59

7 *Ayat-i Bayyinat*, Dundas, Canada: Association for Baha'i Studies in Persian, 1999, pp. 3-4

8 e-mail on H-Bahai list 20 October 2001.

9 Cole, *Tigris*

10 Cole, *Tigris*

reference from the writings of Baha'u'llah which parallels the Tablet to the Shah but instead of referring to "the breezes of the All-Glorious" wafting over him, he uses the phrase "the breezes of Revelation (wahy)"¹¹, thus indicating that Baha'u'llah thought that what occurred in the Siyah-Chal was revelation (wahy) rather than merely inspiration (ilham).

Saeidi also cites several instances where Baha'u'llah has stated that his revelation arose in the year Nine, i.e. 1852-3 or the year "after Hin" (after 68, i.e. 1269/1852-3¹²).

Furthermore, Saeidi questions Cole's dating of this work to about 1857. Cole has based this on the fact that one of the Hidden Words is quoted in the *Sahifah-yi-Shattiyih*, but it is quoted slightly differently than in the form in which it appears in the final form of the Hidden Words. Cole argues from this that the *Sahifah-yi-Shattiyih* can be dated to a time after the Hidden Words were first revealed but before the final version was distributed, which he considers to be about 1857. Saeidi states however that there are numerous instances of Baha'u'llah quoting his own works slightly differently from the way that they were originally revealed and many years after the work was originally revealed. Indeed in the case of the Hidden Words, one of these is quoted in a slightly different form in the tablet to Nasiru'd-Din Shah. If Cole's reasoning were correct then this tablet would also date from about 1857, whereas it belongs in fact to the late Edirne period.

The correspondence on this issue has been extensive and has gone on over several years, but as far as I am aware, Cole has not responded to any of these latter points that Saeidi has raised.

The Meaning of the Word "Amr"

My purpose in reviving this issue is to raise a further point that has not been considered by any of the numerous persons who has discussed this question on several e-mail lists. It is clear that the original point over which Cole and Saeidi disagreed was the meaning of "hich iqbal bih amri nadaram." Indeed it could be said that the disagreement focussed on the word "amr" - whether this word was being used by Baha'u'llah in the specific and technical sense of "Divine Command or Cause" or whether it was being used in the more general sense of "matter" or "affair". The word amr is also central to the second example that Cole has found - in which Baha'u'llah states: "ma`lum va mubarhan ast kih in bandih az khud dhikri va amri nadarad"

In a paper presented at the Irfan Colloquium in 1999¹³, I have given an extensive analysis of the word "amr" in both the Qur'an and in the *Kitab-i-*

11 Saiedi, *Concealment*, 49-50

12 Saiedi, *Concealment*, 51-5

13 Moojan Momen, "A Study of the Word 'Amr' in the Qur'an and in the Writings of Baha'u'llah," published in *Lights of Irfan*, Book 1, 81-94

Iqan. I will not here repeat the detailed analysis given there, but it can be stated in summary that in the Qur'an the word *amr* has a complex range of meanings which is not easily translated by a single English word. When used in connection with God, it certainly means the Divine commission or decree which descends upon a Messenger of God in the form of Revelation, as Cole has stated. But it also is used to denote the judgement of God upon the people - those who accept the Messenger of God are saved and rewarded and those who refuse and disobey him are punished. Instances of this latter meaning of *amr* can be found throughout the Surah of Hud, for example (11: 40, 43, 58, 66, 76, 82, 94). Thus the semantic range of the word *amr* involves not only the descent upon the Messenger of God of Divine revelation but also the imposition upon people of an obligation to accept the revelation, such that if they refuse, there is a consequent punishment.

In Baha'u'llah's *Kitab-i-Iqan*, one finds the same range of meanings for the word *amr*. Regarding Noah, for example, it is stated:

When He was invested with the robe of Prophethood, and was moved by the Spirit of God to arise and proclaim His Cause [*amr*], whoever believed in Him and acknowledged His Faith, was endowed with the grace of a new life. (*Iqan* 154)

This meaning of *amr* becomes of significance for Baha'i polemic in the interpretation of Qur'an 32:5 which states:

He [God] establishes al-*amr* from heaven to earth and it will return to Him in a Day, the length of which is one thousand years in your reckoning

If we now take these points back to the disagreement between Cole and Saeidi, the critical distinction that becomes evident in connection with the meaning of the word *amr* is the distinction between that of merely being the bearer of a revelation and that of imposing upon people the obligation of abandoning the previous revelation and accepting the new revelation. Revelation (*wahy*) and *amr* are thus two separate conditions which do not necessarily co-exist. It is possible to have *wahy* without *amr* (although not, I think, *amr* without *wahy*). In other words, it would appear that for a period of time while he was in Baghdad, Baha'u'llah was the conscious bearer of a revelation but that he chose not to openly declare this fact and thus impose upon the people the necessity of choosing whether to accept his new revelation or not. During the entirety of the Baghdad period, therefore, the *amr* of the Bab held sway - the obligation of people was to accept and follow the religion of the Bab.

I assume that both Cole and Saeidi would agree that in 1857 and indeed during the whole of the Baghdad period, Baha'u'llah was not advancing a claim to revelation in such a way as to challenge and oblige those with whom he was in contact (mainly the Babis) to follow him. If there is

agreement on that, then given the full meaning of the word *amr*, he was not putting forward an *amr*. In other words, regardless of whether we accept Cole's claim that Baha'u'llah did not in 1857 envisage advancing a claim to divine revelation and that his thinking only developed later in this direction or we accept Saeidi's contention that Baha'u'llah was fully aware of his station as a revelator of God's Will and was indeed hinting at this in his writings, the phrase "*hich iqbal bih amri nadaram.*" has no bearing on this issue. Even if Cole is correct in translating it as "I make no claim to a Cause," this would still be in accordance with Saeidi's view that Baha'u'llah was fully aware of his station and was hinting at it in his writings. Given the full meaning of the word *amr*, even if Baha'u'llah were fully aware of his station, he was not at this time proclaiming it and calling people to follow him. Thus the *amr* - the obligation to follow Baha'u'llah and God's judgement upon them depending on the decision they made - had not yet been laid upon people.

Baha'u'llah's Messianic Concealment and Theophanic Disclosure

Christopher Buck¹⁴, Juan Cole¹⁵ and others have written of Baha'u'llah's Baghdad period as being that of "messianic secrecy" or of "a messianic secret". This term reflects Baha'u'llah's own description of this period, the "set time of concealment"¹⁶. MacEoin appears to believe that during this period, Baha'u'llah had no messianic secret and that the idea of putting forward a claim occurred to Baha'u'llah only in about the beginning of 1863. MacEoin believes the accounts of Baha'u'llah's experience in the Siyah Chal (and possibly also the Ridvan Garden) to be a retrospective rewriting of history in order to conform to certain Shi`i and Shaykhi expectations about the year 1269 and 1280¹⁷. Initially Cole disputed MacEoin's position and asserted that even in Baha'u'llah's earliest works, such as the *Rashh-i `Ama* and the *Qasidah al-Warqa'iyah*, which date from Baha'u'llah's Tehran and Sulaymaniyyah period respectively, Baha'u'llah was signalling that his true station was that of being the bearer of a revelation and a number of individuals realised this station during the Baghdad period¹⁸. More recently, Cole has gone back from this position and now states that he considers that Baha'u'llah reached a consciousness of a Divine mission in between about 1857 and 1859¹⁹.

14 Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, Kalimat, 1995, pp. 257 ff

15 Cole "The Book of the River" and "Baha'u'llah's Surah of the Companions: An Early Edirne Tablet of Declaration, c. 1864: Introduction and Provisional Translation," *Baha'i Studies Bulletin*, 5(3)-6(1), June 1991, pp. 4-74, see p. 8, 10, 21

16 see Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970, p. 151

17 MacEoin, "Religious Authority Claims in Middle Babism", paper written for Third Annual Los Angeles Baha'i History Conference

18 Cole, "Baha'u'llah and the Naqshbandi Sufis in Iraq, 1854-1856", *From Iran East and West, Studies in Babi and Baha'i History*, vol. 2, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1984, Series: Studies in Babi and Baha'i History 2, pp. 1-28

19 Cole, *Tigris*

It seems to the present writer that, given the fact that the references to denying an amr are not relevant to this issue, as indicated above, we are left with the supporting evidence that Saeidi has presented (as described above - Baha'u'llah's use of the word "revelation (wahy)" in relation to his Siyah Chal experience and the instances where Baha'u'llah has stated that his revelation arose in the year Nine), which Cole has not countered. Cole's reference to Baha'u'llah denying the performance of miracles at the beginning of the Sahifah-yi-Shattiyih would not seem to be relevant since Baha'u'llah dismissed the importance of miracles throughout the whole of his ministry. And in any case, if the amr of the Bab still held sway during the whole of the Baghdad period, then it would not surprise us to find Baha'u'llah expressing this fact in various ways.

An additional point that needs to be made here is that, according to Shi'i traditions, the Imams, who receive inspiration (ilham), only hear this inspiration, whereas a Messenger of God (rasul) who receives revelation (wahy), sees the Angel who delivers the revelation²⁰. The fact that Baha'u'llah reports seeing the Maid of Heaven is in itself a strong indication that he considered that he was in receipt of a revelation (wahy) rather than merely inspiration (ilham).

There seems to be no good grounds for accepting MacEoin's assertion that this was all rewriting of history by Baha'u'llah and so, unless Cole can produce some grounds for refuting this evidence, it would appear reasonable to accept Baha'u'llah's statements regarding the significance of the Siyah Chal and Ridvan episodes at their face value, which more or less corresponds to the traditional Baha'i interpretation as given by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By*. This would then divide the life of Baha'u'llah theologically into three stages:

1. The period before the onset of revelation, which Baha'u'llah describes by the words "I was but a man like others, asleep . . ." ²¹ and which `Abdu'l-Baha expounds as meaning that although the Manifestation of God in the Manifestation from birth, his mission is not activated until a particular time ²²
2. The period during which revelation (wahy) is present but no claim had been advanced that represented the imposition of amr upon the people, the messianic concealment.
3. The period during which both amr and revelation are present, the theophanic disclosure, following which the laws of the new religion are given.

²⁰ see Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 149-50

²¹ Baha'u'llah, *Proclamation of Baha'u'llah*, Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1968, 57

²² Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990, 155-6.

Incidentally, we have evidence from as early as 1867 that the ordinary Baha'is understood this concept that Baha'u'llah had revealed himself gradually. In a letter written in 1867 by the Baha'i community of Baghdad to the United States Congress, we have the following statement regarding Baha'u'llah: "That wise man revealed himself till he appeared like the high sun in midday."²³

Although the broad outline of these three stages in Baha'u'llah's life are now clear, the exact dating of these stages is not as clear-cut as one may think. Although the onset of revelation is generally regarded as having started with the appearance of the Maid of Heaven to Baha'u'llah in the Siyah-Chal, sometime between September 1852 and January 1853, this does not fully take into account the episode of Baha'u'llah's meeting with Shaykh Hasan Zunuzi in Karbala in 1851. Nabil Zarandi, who appears to have known Shaykh Hasan personally, records that Baha'u'llah confided to Shaykh Hasan "the secret that He was destined to reveal at a later time in Baghdad"²⁴ Now it may be that since the claim put forward by Baha'u'llah to Shaykh Hasan was that of being the return of the Imam Husayn this did not necessarily imply a claim to revelation. It does, however, mean that Baha'u'llah was communicating some inkling of a higher station earlier than 1852. Similarly, the date for the end of this period of messianic secrecy is not exactly defined.

It is clear from the statements of Baha'u'llah that he made some form of claim to a small number of his companions in the Garden of Ridvan in April 1863. But at what point in time can it be said that the amr - the obligation to follow Baha'u'llah - had been laid upon the people? Was it in April 1863, when only a small number were informed and there appears to have been no attempt to spread this news, or in 1864 when a few tablets written by Baha'u'llah begin to make his claim to authority clear, or in 1866-7, when he began to send individuals to Iran to propagate his claim to the Babis and at the same time he openly challenged Mirza Yahya, who was widely acknowledged as the head of the Babi community, or should we, for theological reasons, delay this until the period of Baha'u'llah's proclamation to the kings and rulers of the world in 1868-72 (the kings and rulers acting in a sense as proxies for their people)?

During the years when Baha'u'llah lived in Baghdad, he "appeared in the guise of, and continued to labour as, one of the foremost disciples of the Bab"²⁵ The main thrust of his activities were towards reforming and purifying the Babi community. A significant number of individuals are, however, reported as having come to realise that he occupied a much higher

²³ E-Mail posting by Robert Stauffer, 4 Jun 1997. See also Persecution and Protection: Documents about Baha'is, 1867, 1897, and 1902, *World Order*, 2006, 37(3), 31-38

²⁴ Muhammad-i-Zarandi *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, translated from the Persian by Shoghi Effendi (1932; reprint, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 32

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 128.

station. These are said to have come to this conclusion either from reading his writings²⁶ or from meeting him (for example Nabil Akbar, Shams-i Jahan Khanum Fitnih, and Mirza Fath-`Ali Khan Fath-i-A`zam.²⁷

Following the open declaration of his mission in 1863-8, Baha'u'llah began to reveal the new laws of his dispensation, most particularly in the *Kitab al-Aqdas*, followed by the new social teachings of his religion, in a series of important tablets revealed after the *Aqdas*. Baha'u'llah himself links the theophanic disclosure and the imposition of the *amr* upon the people with the revelation of a new law in the following passage from the Tablet to `Abdu'r-Razzaq, referring to the rejection of Baha'u'llah by the Azalis:

And when the Cause (*amr*) of God was revealed and the laws, by which the entirety of the *Bayan* was confirmed and upon which it is dependent, were promulgated, they then pushed these aside, as you have seen and heard.²⁸

In summary then, we may discern three periods to the life of Baha'u'llah and two periods to the ministry of Baha'u'llah. There was initially a period when, although there are some hagiographical accounts of wonders in his childhood and youth, there is nothing to indicate that he put forward any claim or was in receipt of any special divine guidance. From 1844 onwards, he acted as one of the followers of the Bab. Then came the first phase of his ministry, a period of messianic concealment, during which Baha'u'llah was in receipt of revelation (*wahy*) but had not yet openly advanced a claim, which would have laid the obligation of acceptance, the *amr*, upon the people. This period lasted from roughly 1852 to 1863, but may, for the Babis of Iran have extended to 1867. During this period also, Baha'u'llah acted as one of the followers of the Bab. The second phase of his ministry, and the third period of his life, was the period of theophanic disclosure, which was initiated with the Declaration in the Garden of Ridvan in 1863 but only gradually attained its full force as Baha'u'llah successively disclosed his claim to the Babi community in 1866-7 and to the rest of the world in 1868-72. This was the period when both *amr* and *wahy* were present.

The Ministry of the Bab

Having outlined a schema for the life and ministry of Baha'u'llah, I would now like to see in what way this can be overlaid onto the life and ministry of the Bab. In Babi-Baha'i history the start of the ministry of the Bab is usually stated to start from his declaration to Mulla Husayn Bushru'i on the evening

²⁶ see Momen, "A Preliminary Survey of the Baha'i Community in Iran during the Nineteenth Century", in *Iran im 19. Jahrhundert und die Entstehung der Baha'i Religion*, ed. Christoph Burgel and Isabel Schayani, Hildesheim, 1998, p. 34, no.3

²⁷ see also list of twelve persons who became enthusiastic followers of Baha'u'llah in Momen, "A Preliminary Survey," p. 34, n.4

²⁸ Baha'u'llah *Itiqadat va Chand Lawh-i Digar*. Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'adah, c. 1924. Reprinted, H-Bahai: East Lansing, Mi., 2001, 52

of 22 May 1844. The exact equivalent in the life of the Bab to Baha'u'llah's experience of the Maid of Heaven in the Siyah-Chal is however dated by the Bab to have occurred about 2 months before. In the *Kitab al-Haramayn*, the Bab writes:

In truth, the first day that the Spirit descended in the heart of this slave was the fifteenth of the month of Rabi`u'l-Avval [1260, i.e. 4 April 1844]²⁹.

This may correspond to the vision that the Bab describes of the severed head of the Imam Husayn. This vision is described by the Bab in one of his writings which is quoted in Nabil's Narrative: In one of His writings revealed in the year '60 A.H., the Bab declares the following:

"The spirit of prayer which animates My soul is the direct consequence of a dream which I had in the year before the declaration of My Mission. In My vision I saw the head of the Imam Husayn, the Siyyidu'sh-Shuhada', which was hanging upon a tree. Drops of blood dripped profusely from His lacerated throat. With feelings of unsurpassed delight, I approached that tree and, stretching forth My hands, gathered a few drops of that sacred blood, and drank them devoutly. When I awoke, I felt that the Spirit of God had permeated and taken possession of My soul. My heart was thrilled with the joy of His Divine presence, and the mysteries of His Revelation were unfolded before My eyes in all their glory."³⁰

This vision may also correspond to the episode related by Khadijih Bigum, the wife of the Bab, in which she saw the Bab one night intoning a prayer: "His face was luminous; rays of light radiated from it. He looked so majestic and resplendent that fear seized me." Later the Bab said to her: "It was the will of God that you should have seen Me in the way you did last night, so that no shadow of doubt should ever cross your mind, and you should come to know with absolute certainty that I am the Manifestation of God Whose advent has been expected for a thousand years. This light radiates from My heart and from My being"³¹

The claim that is explicitly made, however, in the first chapter of the *Qayyum al-Asma*, which the Bab wrote in the presence of Mulla Husayn on 23 May 1844 was that of being the Gate to the Hidden Imam. In all of the books written in the early years of his ministry, the Bab never makes any explicit claim to any higher station. He also does not abrogate the law of Islam - indeed he urges his followers to be meticulous in carrying out the Islamic law³². Thus just as Baha'u'llah, in his early years, appears to be a reformer and purifier of the religion of the Bab, so the Bab, in these early

29 Nicolas, *Seyyed Ali Mohammed*, Paris: Du Jarric, 1905, p. 206

30 Zarandi, *Nabil's Narrative*, 253

31 H.M. Balyuzi, *Khadijih Bagum*, Oxford: George Rnald 1981, 11-13.

32 Tablet to Tahiri, cited in Asadu'llah Fadil Mazandarani, *Tarikh-i Zuhur al-Haqq* ("History of the Manifestation of Truth"). Volume 3.. Tehran, n.p., 1944. Reprinted, H-Bahai: Lansing, Mi., 1998, p. 334

years appears as a reformer and purifier of Islam. Within the Shaykhi community to whom the Bab and the Letters of the Living predominantly addressed themselves in the early years, the Bab appeared to be a leader in succession to Sayyid Kazim. Even the title of "the Bab" was not exceptional as Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kazim had occasionally been known by this title.

The Bab did not proclaim his full identity as the Mahdi and the revealer of a new revelation until the summer of 1848. At this time, two events occurred almost simultaneously. First, those attending the conference of Badasht heard Tahirih and Baha'u'llah proclaim that the Islamic dispensation had ended. Second, the Bab declared himself to be the Mahdi at his trial before the Crown Prince Nasiru'd-Din Mirza at Tabriz. It was perhaps not the declaration of being the Mahdi itself which was the decisive issue for the matter under consideration in this paper, since Muslims commonly expected that the Mahdi would follow Islam and would not bring a new revelation. It was rather that during the trial, the Bab claimed that he was revealing divine verses, and this was discussed at length by the `ulama present. Immediately after this, the Bab wrote the Persian Bayan in which he abrogated the laws of Islam and promulgated his own laws.

Prior to these episodes in the summer of 1848, many, possibly most, of the Babis thought that the Bab was merely claiming to be an Islamic leader, a leader of the Shaykhi sect, the gate to the Hidden Imam. This was what he appeared to be claiming in his writings and this is the evident meaning of the title of "Bab" that he had taken. There is evidence for this assertion in the fact that when the Bab's full claims became known at the conference of Badasht, there were some who left the Babi movement as a result. Some of those attending the conference apostatised and left and we are told that in Maraghih, where most of the Shaykhis had become Babis, they apostatised when they learned that the Bab had abrogated the laws of Islam³³

There were also many, however, who realised, before the summer of 1848, that the Bab's claim was far higher than that of merely being a gate to the Hidden Imam. As early as the first year of the Bab's ministry, Sunni and Shi'i `ulama gathered at the trial of Mulla `Ali Bastami in Baghdad perceived that while the text of the Qayyum al-Asma may claim that its author is the gate to the Hidden Imam, the language, through use of such terms as *wahy* and *nuzul*, in fact denoted a claim to divine revelation. If Sunni and Shi'i `ulama could discern that there lay a claim to revelation, a claim to a station equivalent to that of the prophet Muhammad, behind the text of the Bab, we can be sure that the leading disciples of the Bab also did. They were, after all, educated in exactly the esoteric tradition of Shaykhism that was most informed about such subtleties. Some of these leading Babis were more explicit in revealing their discovery of his high station (for

³³ Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 58.

example Tahirih), while others kept the knowledge hidden. I have discussed this theme in more detail in a paper regarding the trial of Mulla `Ali Bastami³⁴

We may therefore see that, just as with Baha'u'llah, when the main body of the Babis during the Baghdad period saw Baha'u'llah as an inspiring leader but still basically within the circle of Babism, so during the early years of the ministry of the Bab, the majority of the Babis probably conceived of the Bab as a Shaykhi leader, as a gateway to the Hidden Imam who is the true Lord of the Age. However, just as there were some leading Babis who recognized, either from meeting him or reading his writings in the Baghdad period, that Baha'u'llah's true claim and station were far higher, so also there were undoubtedly a group of the followers of the Bab in the early years who recognised, either from his writings or from meeting him that his claim was much greater. We could say that just as during the Baghdad period, the amr still lay with the Bab and the people were not yet called upon to believe in Baha'u'llah as the purveyor of a new religion from God, abrogating the religion of the Bab, so from May 1844 to July 1848, the amr still lay with Muhammad and the generality of the people were not yet called upon to believe in the Bab as the bearer of a new religion from God. The period of May 1844 to July 1848, thus become a period of messianic concealment, which ended with the theophanic disclosure occasioned by Tahirih's proclamation at the conference of Badasht and the Bab's declaration at his trial that he was the Mahdi and the author of a new revelation.

Continuing the parallels, we might point out that just as there are statements in the writings of Baha'u'llah during the Baghdad period denying that he was possessed of any amr and appearing to subordinate himself to the authority of the Bab and the Babi hierarchy (as in the *Sahifah-yi-Shattiyih*), so there are similar statements of the Bab in these early years. There is for example the episode in the *Masjid-i-Vakil* in Shiraz, when his enemies had forced the Bab to issue a recantation of his claims. There are several versions of this episode. Nabil gives the following:

The Bab, as He faced the congregation, declared: "The condemnation of God be upon him who regards me either as a representative of the Imam or the gate thereof. The condemnation of God be also upon whosoever imputes to me the charge of having denied the unity of God, of having repudiated the prophethood of Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, of having rejected the truth of any of the messengers of old, or of having refused to recognise the guardianship of `Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, or of any of the imams who have succeeded him."³⁵

³⁴ Moojan Momen, "The Trial of Mulla `Ali Bastami: a combined Sunni-Shi'i fatwa against the Bab." *Iran*, 1982, 20, 113-43.

³⁵ Zarandi, *Nabil's Narrative*, 154

The following is an alternative account of the Bab's words which occurs in a letter written by Sayyid Husayn Katib, the Bab's amanuensis:

O people! Whoever believes in my prophethood (nubavvat), may the curse of God be upon him. Whoever considers that I am an appointed gate (bab-i mansus) sent by the grace of the [Hidden] Imam (upon him be peace), may the curse of God be upon him. I am but a servant, believing in God and in his verses.³⁶

And yet another account exists from Haji Mirza Muhammad Sadiq, who was not a believer in the Bab:

O people! Know ye that I have not said anything that my ancestor the Messenger of God did not say. That which Muhammad has made permissible [in the Holy Law] is permissible until the Day of Resurrection (yawm al-qiyama) and that which Muhammad has made illicit is illicit until the Day of Resurrection. As the Immaculate [Imam] (upon him be peace) has said: When the Qa'im arises, that is the Resurrection.³⁷

In the *Sahifih-yi `Adliyyah* and other writings from this period, the Bab also denies any new revelation and commands the people to follow the laws of the Qur'an and the teachings of Muhammad.

The parallels between the Bab and Baha'u'llah can even be extended to the ways in which they made their full claim known - the manner of the theophanic disclosure. Baha'u'llah proclaimed his full station in three ways. First privately to a small group of his followers in the Garden of Ridvan, openly to the Babis in the early years of the Edirne period, and then to the peoples of the world through their kings and rulers in the late Edirne, early Akka period. The full station of the Bab was declared to the Babis at the conference of Badasht and it was proclaimed to the Crown Prince and leading religious figures of Tabriz at his trial. The Bab at this time also wrote to the Shah of Iran and the Prime Minister Haji Mirza Aqasi. There is even a parallel to the private Ridvan Garden declaration of Baha'u'llah in the declaration by the Bab that he was the Qa'im to one of his foremost disciples `Azim shortly before his public declaration at his trial³⁸. The fact that even a leading disciple such as `Azim, who mixed freely with the Babis in Tehran and Adharbayjan, was perturbed by this claim at this late date is further evidence that the realisation of the full station of the Bab was not very widespread among the Babis prior to the summer of 1848.

In his book, the Seven Proofs, the Bab explains that the need for a period of messianic concealment and the gradual unfoldment of his claims arose out of the lack of capacity among the people to accept his full claim at the start

³⁶ Quoted in A.Q. Afnan, *Zindigani-yi Hadrat-i Bab* 167

³⁷ Quoted in A.Q. Afnan, *Zindigani-yi Hadrat-i Bab* 168

³⁸ Zarandi, *Nabil's Narrative*, 313

of his mission and out of a desire to assist people to gradually come to a full realisation of the magnitude of the his claim:

Consider the manifold favours vouchsafed by the Promised One, and the effusions of His bounty which have pervaded the concourse of the followers of Islam to enable them to attain unto salvation. Indeed observe how He Who representeth the origin of creation, He Who is the Exponent of the verse, 'I, in very truth, am God', identified Himself as the Gate [Bab] for the advent of the promised Qa'im, a descendant of Muhammad, and in His first Book enjoined the observance of the laws of the Qur'an, so that the people might not be seized with perturbation by reason of a new Book and a new Revelation and might regard His Faith as similar to their own, perchance they would not turn away from the Truth and ignore the thing for which they had been called into being.³⁹

Baha'u'llah has recapitulated and expanded on this in a tablet written to Aqa Mirza Aqa Nuru'd-Din:

Thou art well aware that the Commentary on the Ahsan al-Qisas (the Qayyum al-Asma of the Bab) was revealed according to what was current among the people (bi ma`ind an-nas) and this was purely out of bounty and grace that haply the people of negligence and error may ascend to the heaven of knowledge (jabarut-i `ilm). Thus most of what is mentioned in that book is what has been accepted as truth among the Muslims (ahl al-furqan). If what was the Will of God had been sent down from the start, no-one would have been able to bear it and no-one would have remained. All of this is out of His grace and bounty towards His creatures. Observe that at the start of his ministry, that holy one revealed himself in the station of gatehood (babiyyat). This was out of consideration that the birds of the hearts of humanity were not capable of flying above that station . . . The people have been and will continue to be immersed in the ocean of idle fancies and veiled from what God doth will, except those whom God has delivered through His Grace and whom He has caused to recognise what He hath revealed through His command . . . Thus out of grace to them, the Sun of Truth occupied himself with uttering trivia and the Ancient Ocean spoke forth only droplets. Thus it is that the Primal Point hath appeared in the name of gatehood (babiyyat), and the people did not accept even this limited station, let alone any mention of guardianship (lordship, vilayat) and such matters. And this despite the fact that all of these stations and those beyond them have been revealed and come into existence by a single word out of the ocean of his bounty and by his command they also return to annihilation and oblivion.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, Haifa, 1976, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Quoted in A.Q. Afnan, *Zindigani-yi Hadrat-i Bab* 203-4

Finally, in a tablet which appears to date from the Edirne period, the Surat al-Fath, Baha'u'llah restates this theme and draws the parallels between the Bab's gradually unfolding claims and his own initial concealment of his claims. First, he describes the gradual unfoldment of the claims of the Bab:

So recollect, O people! The moment when there came unto you the Revealer of the Bayan with wondrous, holy verses. At that time he said: "I am the Gate of Knowledge (bab al-`ilm) and whoever asserts more than that in relation to me has assuredly invented lies about me and has sinned greatly." Then later he said "I am the Qa'im, the True One, whose manifestation you were promised in mighty, noble scrolls." Then he said, magnified be his utterance, "I, verily, am the Primal Point. And this is, in reality, Muhammad, the messenger of God, the same [person] as thou hast heard and witnessed in the tablets of God, the King, the Ruler." And when the beings of a number of souls had progressed [sufficiently], thereupon, the veils were torn asunder and, from the Dawning-Place of holiness, there rose up [the call]: "I verily am God, no God is there except Me, thy Lord and the Lord of all the worlds." And also: "I, verily, from the beginning which hath no beginning, was a divinity, the One, the Single, the Unique. I did not take unto myself any partner or likeness or deputy. I verily sent the prophets and the Messengers from all eternity and will continue to send them to all eternity" .

..

Then in this tablet, Baha'u'llah comments on the gradual unfoldment of his own claims, mentions explicitly that there was a time during which he elevated the name of his brother and was submissive before the authoritative figures in the Babi movement, and clearly indicates that the amr did not lie with him in those days:

By God, O people! I did not desire any Cause (amr) for myself and followed all the Manifestations of old. I supported the Cause (amr) of God in every way during the days when faces were concealed out of fear of the oppressors. I humbled myself before every soul in the Bayan and lowered the wing of submission before every worthy believer. I safeguarded my brother [Mirza Yahya] . . . and elevated his name among the servants of God . . . There was none of the people of the Bayan for whom I did not reveal a tablet in which I mentioned him with high praise. Every fair-minded and trustworthy person will bear witness to this.⁴¹

Conclusion

The thesis of this paper is that the phenomenon of a period of messianic concealment followed by a theophanic disclosure is common to at least the

⁴¹ Based on a translation by Stephen Lambden in "Some Notes on Baha'u'llah's Gradually Evolving Claims of the Adrianople/Edirne Period," *Bulletin of Baha'i Studies*, vol. 5.3-6.1, June 1991, 75-83, see pp. 79-80; here retranslated from the original manuscript, an unnumbered volume from the Iranian Baha'i National Archives, pp. 77-79

Bab and Baha'u'llah (and a case can be made for a similar phenomenon in the life of Jesus and Muhammad). The period of messianic concealment appears to be a period when although the Manifestation is in receipt of divine revelations, these are phrased in such a way as to conceal their identity as revelation. Since no claim to being the bearer of a new revelation and the inaugurator of a new religious dispensation is made by the Manifestation during this time, there is no obligation on the people to follow the Manifestation, although a small number do discern the reality of the Manifestation. During this period, the amr still belongs to the previous Manifestation. At some point however, the new Manifestation discloses his true nature and puts forward the claim to be the inaugurator of a new religion. This disclosure is made both to the followers of the previous religion and to the secular authorities. This theophanic disclosure now puts an obligation on all to follow the new Manifestation. A new amr has begun. Following this the new Manifestation begins to reveal the new laws and teachings associated with his dispensation. Baha'u'llah has given something of the reason for this particular strategy in the case of the Bab and it is probable that much the same applies to the case of Baha'u'llah himself. Baha'u'llah states that the reason for the messianic concealment was that the people of the previous religion were not able to bear the full disclosure of the new Manifestation. Therefore the station of that Manifestation was revealed to them gradually.

PostScript: A Note on the Year Five of the Ministry of the Bab

I have recently been translating for the forthcoming Irfan Colloquium the Bab's commentary on the Verse of Light I was interested to see in this the same prophecy regarding the fifth year of his ministry that also occurs in the Seven Proofs. This prophecy emerges from the Bab's interpretation of the Tradition of Kumayl. In response to the question "What is reality?", the Imam `Ali responded by a series of enigmatic statements.

In both the Seven Proofs and the Commentary on the Verse of Light, the Báb gives an interpretation of this Tradition, emphasising in particular the fifth phrase in this Tradition, which he relates to the fifth year of his ministry. In the Seven Proofs, the Bab merely prophesies that in that year "you will see a light shining from the morn of eternity if you do not flee and are not disturbed." But in the Commentary on the Verse of Light, he gives some indication of what will happen in that year. He begins by quoting the Tradition and then going on to expand on the fifth phrase:

Verily in the first year, there hath appeared the uncovering of the clouds of glory without a sign⁴²; then the obliteration of vain imaginings and the dawning of the known; then the rending of the veils for the overthrow of the

⁴² Min ghayr alBishara; "Piercing the veils of glory, unaided" – Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1950, p. 164

secret; then the attraction of the primal unity for the attributes of the Divine Oneness; then a light dawning forth from the morn of pre-eternity upon the temples of unity (cf Shoghi Effendi translates a slightly different phrase as "Behold, a light hath shone forth out of the Morn of eternity, and lo! its waves have penetrated the inmost reality of all men." *Iqan* 102). And when it has entered upon the five [?fifth year], its effect is that the fire becomes a light. At that moment, the form is completed and, verily, the form of the five is the form of a human being. Its creation is not completed for five years just as we sent to thee thy form.

The meaning of the passage is not entirely clear, but what is clear is that the Bab was signalling that some process that was begun at the start of his ministry would come to fruition in the fifth year and it would come to fruition in a human form.

Now since the fifth phrase of the Tradition of Kumayl reads: "a light dawning forth from the morn of pre-eternity (subh-i azal)," the Azalis have long asserted that this is a prophecy of the arising of Azal in the fifth year of the ministry of the Bab. However, there are problems with this assertion.

First, it is not at all clear that Azal was ever known as Subh-i Azal until a much later period. Mirza Yahya was addressed as Azal in tablets of the Bab, on account of the fact that his name Yahya and Azal are numerically equivalent (=38). However, I have not seen anywhere that the Bab addresses him as Subh-i Azal, and this statement is supported by Ishraq-Khavari⁴³. It is probable that either he himself or, more likely, some of his followers such as the authors of the *Hasht Bihist*, Shaykh Ahmad Ruhi and Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani, began to give him this appellation precisely in order to make him retrospectively fit the prophecy of the Bab related to the Tradition of Kumayl. The Nuqtatu'l-Káf perhaps marks an intermediate stage in the development of this line of Azali thought in that, although the link between Azal and the Tradition of Kumayl is made⁴⁴ nevertheless, Mirza Yahya is never called Subh-i Azal in this text. He is always referred to as Jinab-i Azal or Hadrat-i Azal.

Second, we have another exegesis by the Bab of the Kumayl Tradition in the *Kitab al-Asma* ⁴⁵. Here, referring to the fifth phrase in the Tradition, he states: "Verily, the Primal Point is the Sun of Eternity (azal)." This would indicate that he considered himself to be the referent in this phrase of the Tradition of Kumayl.

⁴³ see Ishraq-Khavari, `Abdu'l-Hamid. *Qamus-i Iqan*. 4 vols. Tehran: Mu'assasah-i Milli-i Matbu'at-i Amri, 128/1972. PDF Edition digitally republished, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2007 vol. 4, p. 1830

⁴⁴ Anon. *Kitab-i Nuqtat al-Kaf: Being the Earliest History of the Babis*, ed. E. G. Browne. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1910 p. 208

⁴⁵ Iran National Baha'i Archives Private Printing: Tehran, 1976, Volume 29, p. 40. See also Sayyid `Ali Muhammad "the Bab" Shirazi. *Kitab-i Asma'* (The Book of Names' of All Things) Ms., private hands. Lansing, MI: H-Bahai, 2005.

Following on from my paper on "Messianic Concealment and Theophanic Disclosure", I would venture to suggest that what the Bab was predicting in the Seven Proofs and the Commentary on the Verse of Light was in fact the fruition of his ministry in its fifth year through his open proclamation of the station of qa'imiyat and mazhariyyat (the end of the period of messianic concealment). Thus, in the words of the Commentary, the Divine Light that was pre-existent in Muhammad and `Ali (which is a Shi`i Tradition to which the Bab also refers in this Commentary) will, in the year 5, become incarnated in a human being - the light becomes flesh!