

# **“By the Fig and the Olive”: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Commentary in Ottoman Turkish on the Qur’anic Sura 95 – notes and provisional translation<sup>1</sup>**

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Sura 95, Tîn (the Fig)<sup>2</sup>

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

1. By the Fig and the Olive,
2. And the Mount of Sinai,
3. And this City of security, –
4. We have indeed created man in the best of moulds,
5. Then do We abase him (to be) the lowest of the low, –
6. Except such as believe and do righteous deeds:  
For they shall have a reward unailing.
7. Then what can, after this, contradict thee,  
as to the judgment (to come)?
8. Is not God the wisest of judges?

## **Introduction**

Although the Bahá’í Faith has its roots in Persia, it developed in the Ottoman Empire through Bahá’u’lláh’s banishment to Baghdad (1853-1863), to Istanbul and Edirne in Rumelia (European Turkey, 1863-1868), and lastly to Ottoman Palestine (1868-1892). Many significant events, like Bahá’u’lláh’s proclamation to various kings and rulers, occurred in the borders of what is today modern Turkey. From 1853, Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá came into contact with many Ottoman officials during their exile, many of whom were friendly. For example, Namik Pasha, governor of Baghdad, and Hurşid Pasha, governor of Edirne, both hesitated to enact banishment decrees of Sultan Abdulaziz. “Young Ottoman” reformers such as the famous poet and writer Namik Kemal (d. 1888) and Midhat Pasha (d. 1884), “father” of the Constitution of 1876 (the third *Tanzimat* or reform edict), and the writer Süleyman Nazif (d. 1927), supporter of the “Young Turk” movement, either communicated with or personally met ‘Abdu’l-

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<sup>2</sup> In this article Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Qur’án is used; however, “Alláh” is substituted by “God”.

Bahá.<sup>3</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, well-versed in various Turkish dialects, acted as his father’s mediator in those times, and had good relations with many Ottomans.

The only published collection of Turkish tablets and prayers by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is entitled *Majmú’ih-yi Alváh wa Munájáthá-yi Turki*.<sup>4</sup> It contains several tablets and prayers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which were written in the Arabic-Persian script, and some of which are partially composed in Persian and/or Arabic. These include tablets to individual Bahá’ís and groups in Caucasia, Erivan, Zinján, Sisán and other places. These texts are mostly short announcements of the glad tidings of Bahá’u’lláh’s coming. Several are in the Azeri dialect. The Bahá’í World Centre apparently has a great number of tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá written in different Turkish dialects,<sup>5</sup> and there might be still more in private hands or libraries.

The Turkish tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are not known to many Bahá’ís, and except for some Ottoman prayers printed in Latin letters,<sup>6</sup> the Bahá’í community of Turkey has little access to them because of their Ottoman script. Consequently, I am aware of no scholarship that has yet been done in the field of Turkish Bahá’í studies. Turkish Bahá’ís born before the script and language reform made by the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), in 1928 and from 1932, who are able to read the Ottoman script, have not been engaged in the academic study of the Bahá’í Faith and its Ottoman writings.<sup>7</sup>

This paper includes what is probably the first study and provisional translation of an Ottoman Turkish tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The original text appears in the previously mentioned collection of Turkish tablets and prayers by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, entitled *Majmú’ih-yi Alváh wa Munájáthá-yi Turki*.<sup>8</sup> The recipient and date of this commentary remain unknown. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ends it by saying that he dictated it to a certain Nesib

<sup>3</sup> See Necati Alkan, “Ottoman Reform Movements and the Bahá’í Faith, 1860s-1920s”; paper presented at a conference on the Bábí and Bahá’í Religions, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 17-21 December 2000 (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Tihrán: Mu’assasih-i Millî-yi Matbú’át-i Amrí, BE 127/1970-7 (henceforth *MAMT*).

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, Iraj Ayman.

<sup>6</sup> Mecdi İnan (ed. and transl.), *Bahai Münacaatlari* (Bahá’í Prayers) Menteş Matbaasi: Istanbul, 1973. Mecdettin (Majdu’ d-Din) İnan has translated major writings of Bahá’u’lláh like the *Hidden Words*, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, and the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* into Turkish. He was a son of the probably first Turkish Bahá’í, Ökkeş Efendi from Antep, who had met Bahá’u’lláh in ‘Akká in the 1870s; see Neyir Özşuca, *Türkiye’de Bahailer* (The Bahá’ís of Turkey), Ankara 1997, 106-108. For İnan’s life, see *Bahá’í World* XIV:348-49.

<sup>7</sup> Neyir Özşuca’s aforementioned book may be regarded as an exception (see note 6 above). It is an insider’s account of the development of the Bahá’í Faith in Turkey, mostly based on oral accounts. Haydar and Meserret Dirioz, scholars of Ottoman literature, were engaged in archive work with regard to the Bahá’í Faith, but have not published on the subject. Abdülkadir Dirioz, father of Haydar Dirioz, was one of the early Bahá’ís of Turkey. He wrote a history of the early Bahá’í community of Turkey entitled *A History of the Bahá’í Faith in Birecik and Memories*. Other books he wrote are *The Promised One of all Nations* and *İsbat-i Uluhiyyet* (“Proofs of the Existence of God”). He furthermore translated John Esslemont’s *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* and Mirza Abu’l-Fađl’s *Kitáb al-Farâ’id* into Ottoman Turkish; see *Bahá’í World* XIV:332.

<sup>8</sup> *MAMT* 146-54; the text of this edition is used in this article. Cf., no title (Tehran: Lajnih-i Naşr-i Áthár-i Amrí, B.E. 105/1327 Shamsí [1948-49]) 59-63, in which the same prayers and tablets are compiled. The latter is the first edition printed in type letters; it has some printing errors.

Effendi. No direct references are made to the Bahá'í Faith or its teachings in the commentary. It is possible from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comment, "as thine Excellency knows," that this piece is an answer to an inquiry by one of the many Ottoman officials in Palestine and elsewhere with whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in contact.<sup>9</sup> In it, 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments on the first verse "By the Fig and the Olive" (*wa 't-tín wa 'z-zaytún*) of Sura 95 of the Qur'án. Moreover, he presents a *tafsír* or commentary on the entire sura.<sup>10</sup> After informing the addressee about the traditional and exoteric interpretations of the commentators of the Qur'án, 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers spiritual meanings and an esoteric exegesis of this Qur'anic chapter. The first part of this article is an overview of the Islamic and the biblical background of the motifs in Sura 95, followed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of the sura with cross-references to other Bahá'í writings. A provisional translation of the 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentary is appended.

### The Islamic Context

Sura 95, known as *Tín*, or the "Fig," is, most probably, one of the earliest Meccan revelations that Muḥammad had received. It belongs to a category of chapters which begin with so-called "introductory oath clusters"; more specifically, it is one of the suras beginning with oaths alluding to sacred localities.<sup>11</sup> The sura begins with the swearing of an oath, by "the Fig" (*at-tín*), "the Olive" (*az-zaytún*), "Mount Sinai" (*túr sínín*) and the "City of security" (*al-balad al-amín*), that God has created man in the best form (*aḥsan taqwím*); he is then degraded to the "lowest of the low" (*asfala sáfilín*). Only those who believe and lead a moral life will receive an abiding reward. This is a testimony to the last two verses where the coming of the Judgement Day (*ad-dín*) is assured and that God is the "wisest of the judges" (*aḥkam al-hákimín*). The majority of Muslim scholars regard it as a Meccan revelation, supported by the image of "this City of security" for Mecca.

The "Fig" appears only once in the Qur'án, while the "Olive" is mentioned several times.<sup>12</sup> Different interpretations exist regarding their meaning. According to some, they represent the fruits themselves. God is swearing by them because of their benefits. The fig was regarded as wholesome and easy to digest, a medicine for various diseases; it softens the human nature, reduces phlegm, removes the filth in the liver and kidneys, and eliminates haemorrhoids. Muḥammad is reported to have recommended that the

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Moojan Momen, "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I was a Hidden Treasure...'", *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 3.4 (1985): 4-35, and at <<http://www.northill.demon.co.uk/relstud/>>. 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed this tablet at the age of thirteen to a certain Ali Şevket Pasha.

<sup>10</sup> Other examples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentaries are his *tafsír* mentioned in footnote 3, another tablet in *MAMT*:138-42, on the Islamic tradition *Inna 'lláh la-yu'ayyid hádhá 'd-dín bi-rajul fájir* (usually translated as "God may support this religion with an evil man"), and his commentary on Qur'án 30:1-4 (Moojan Momen, "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary on the Qur'anic Verses Concerning the Overthrow of the Byzantines: The Stages of the Soul," *Lights of 'Irfán* [Papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars] [2001] II:99-117).

<sup>11</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, "Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Makkan *suras*", in GR Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'án* (London/N.Y.: Routledge, 1993) 3-36.

<sup>12</sup> 6:99, 142; 16:11; 24:35; 80:29.

believers eat figs and to have stated that had He chosen a fruit to have descended from Paradise it would have been the fig.<sup>13</sup>

In the Indian tradition as well, we come across the fig tree in paradise, as the “Tree of Life” or the “cosmic tree”. In the Bhagavad-Gita (15:1-3), it is a giant cosmic “upside-down-tree” with its roots in the sky and its branches covering the earth, its leaves representing the hymns of the Veda. “The eternal *aśvattha* (“fig tree”; *Ficus religiosa*) is a manifestation of Brahma in the universe.”<sup>14</sup> Hebraic and Islamic traditions likewise offer the same image of the Tree of Life.<sup>15</sup> Yusuf Ali, translator of the Qur’án, notes with regard to the “Fig” in Sura 95: “It has been suggested that the Fig stands for the *Ficus Indica*, the Bo-tree, under which Gautama Buddha obtained Nirvana ... if accepted it would cover pristine Buddhism and the ancient Vedic religions from which it was an offshoot. In this way all the great religions of the world would be indicated” (note 6198). Furthermore, there are Islamic traditions from the Imams on the benefits and importance of the fig:

The fig removes the bad smell of the mouth. It strengthens the gums and bones, causes the hair to grow, puts an end to some ailments so that medicine is not needed.<sup>16</sup>

The fig is the most comparable thing to the fruits of Heaven.<sup>17</sup>

Another interpretation is that the fig is a metaphor for individuals developing or wasting their potential:

If we take the Fig literally to refer to the fruit of the tree, it can stand as a symbol of man’s destiny in many ways. Under cultivation it can be one of the finest, most delicious, and most wholesome fruits in existence: in its wild state, it is nothing but tiny seeds, and it is insipid, and often full of worms and maggots. So man at his best has a noble destiny: at his worst, he is “the lowest of the low.”<sup>18</sup>

The olive fruit and its oil are no less salutary,<sup>19</sup> and, according to tradition, are

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *aṭ-ṭibb an-Nabawí* (ed. Sayyid al-Jamílí) (Beirut: Dár al-kitáb al-‘arabí, 1990) 224.

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion* (N.Y./London: MacMillan, 1987) s.v. “Trees,” 15:27; see also Murray Emeneau, “The Strangling Figs in Sanskrit Literature”, in *Sanskrit Studies of M.B. Emeneau – Selected papers*, ed. B.A. van Nooten (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988) 11-27.

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Trees,” 15:28.

<sup>16</sup> Abú Ja’far Muḥammad al-Kulayní ar-Rázi, *al-Káfi* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1982) 6:358; ascribed to Imam ‘Alí ibn Músá ar-Ridá; cited in Saiyed Abbas Sadr-‘Ameli (transl.), *An Enlightening Commentary into the Light of the Holy Qur’an* (Isfahan: Amir al-Mo’mineen Library, 1995) 2:117.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Yusuf Ali, note 6194.

<sup>19</sup> al-Jawziyya, 240.

recommended by Muḥammad and the Imams:

Have olive oil (*zayt*) in your food and grease your body with it since it is from a Holy Tree (*shajara mubáraka*).<sup>20</sup>

Olive oil is good food stuff. It makes the smell of the mouth sweet, removes phlegm, makes the colour of the face cheerful, strengthens the nerves, puts an end to sickness and weakness, and quenches the fire wrath.<sup>21</sup>

However, the interpretation of fig and olive as fruits is problematic in the context of this passage, which continues with the terms, "Mount Sinai" and the "City of security." Most commentators say that fruits themselves are not the intended meaning but rather that they represent two places or mountains in Syria (the holy land) where prophets received divine revelation. One tradition states that they are two mountains called in Aramaic *Ṭúr Tína* and *Ṭúr Zaytá*; other traditions say that by "Fig" is meant the mosque of Damascus (*masjid Dimashq*), the mosque of the Seven Sleepers or "the companions of the cave" (*asháb al-kahf*),<sup>22</sup> or Damascus itself, while the "Olive" represents the mosque of Jerusalem (*masjid Bayt al-muqaddas*), the mosque of Elijah or the city of Jerusalem. According to others they represent the regions where the two trees grow.<sup>23</sup>

With regard to the verse "By the Fig and the Olive," Ibn Kathír states that it refers to two regions in Syria (Palestine); these are places where Jesus was born and dwelled. By continuing the passage with Mt. Sinai (where God conversed with Moses), and Mecca (the city where Muḥammad was commissioned with his prophethood) these verses are equivalent to the verses in the Torah: "The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from mount Paran" (Deut. 33:2). Seir is where Jesus dwelled and Paran is Mecca. Due to their distinction, God has sworn an oath by these places. These regions where figs and olives grow are at the same time places where prophets were raised; God emphasizes here the importance of the places where they appeared.<sup>24</sup> The "Fig" is also said to refer to Noah's mosque that was constructed on Mount Judi of the Ararat range in Eastern Turkey, or to symbolize the leaves of the fig tree in Paradise with which Adam and Eve dressed themselves.<sup>25</sup>

It has been suggested that the reference "a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the East nor of the West" (Qur'án 24:35), and "a tree springing out of Mt. Sinai, which produces oil, and relish for those who use it for food" in 23:20 are connected with Mt.

<sup>20</sup> Attributed to Muḥammad, cited in al-Jawziyya, 240, and Sadr-'Ameli, 2:117.

<sup>21</sup> Attributed to Imam 'Alí b. Músá ar-Riḍá, cited in Sadr-'Ameli, 2:117.

<sup>22</sup> Sura 18, *al-Kahf* (The Cave) relates their story.

<sup>23</sup> Fakhru'd-din ar-Rázi, *Mafátiḥ al-ghayb* or *at-Tafsir al-kabir* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-miḥriyya, 1278/1861-62) 6:577; Ibn Kathír, *Tafsir al-Qur'án al-'a'im* (Beirut: Dár al-fikr, 2 1389/1970) 7:323.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Kathír, 7:324.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:323; ar-Rázi, 6:577.

Sinai, where olive groves were probably found.<sup>26</sup> Mt. Sinai in Arabic is *túr síná'* (see Qur'án 23:20), and it appears in the form *túr sínín* only in Sura 95, possibly only for the rhyme *sínín/ámín*.<sup>27</sup> The first verse of Sura 52, "By the Mount (of Revelation) (*wa't-túr*)" is probably a reference to Mount Sinai. The primary interpretation of *sínín* by the commentators is the mountain where God conversed with Moses; other meanings assigned to *sínín* are "blessed", "good", "fertile" and the like.<sup>28</sup>

With respect to the "Olive," the celebrated "Light Verse"<sup>29</sup> in Qur'án 24:35 is particularly worthy of consideration:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth (*Alláhu núr as-samáwát wa'l-ard*). The parable of His Light (*núr*) is as if there were a Niche (*mishkát*) and within it a Lamp (*mišbáh*): the Lamp enclosed in Glass (*zujája*): the glass as it were a brilliant star (*kawkab durrí*): lit from a blessed Tree (*shajara mubáraka*), an Olive (*zaytúna*), neither of the East nor of the West (*lá sharqíyya wa-lá gharbíyya*), whose Oil (*zaytuhá*) is well nigh Luminous, though fire (*nár*) scarce touched it: light upon Light (*núr 'alá núr*)!

In Islamic mysticism and sayings ascribed to the Shí'í Imams the "burning bush" has symbolic meaning and is associated with the mystic olive in this verse and the Qur'anic "Lote Tree" (*sidra*). The Sinaitic tree, the "burning bush", is moreover regarded as an olive.<sup>30</sup> In East Syriac/Persian Christianity, the essence of the Tree of Life, an ancient Mesopotamian image, is its oil. It is "sacramentally used as a 'white chrisim' [in baptism ceremony], pressed from its fruit, the olive", and is the "key of the hidden treasure-house of symbols."<sup>31</sup>

As to the last sacred locality mentioned in Sura 95, commentators unanimously agree that the "City of security" (*al-balad al-ámín*) is Mecca (cf. Qur'án 29:67, "a Sanctuary secure," *haram ámin*). Before the dawn of Islam, Mecca was safe in the months of pilgrimage, because no fighting or war was allowed. "Mecca is the City of security, he who enters it is safe."<sup>32</sup> Some Imáms are reported to have stated that from each of those three places, i.e., Mt. Tíiná, Mt. Zaytá' and Mecca, God has sent a prophet and messenger (*nabíyyan mursilan*), great lawgivers (*ašháb ash-shará'í' al-kibár*).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur'án*, eds. C.E. Bosworth and M.E.J. Richardson (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1991) 2:557.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Násiru'd-Dín Muḥammad at-Tūsí, *at-Tibyán fi tafsír al-Qur'án* (Najaf, 1383/1963) 10:375-76.

<sup>29</sup> This verse has been of particular interest to Muslim commentators. See, e.g. the seminal work *Mishkát al-anwár* (The Niche of Lights) of the great Muslim scholar al-Ghazáli.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen N. Lambden, "The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bábi and Bahá'í Scripture", in Moojan Momen (ed.), *Studies in the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions*, vol. 5 (Studies in honor of the late Hasan M. Balyuzi) (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988) 65-183.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith* (Albany: SUNY Press: 1998) 127.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Kathír, 7:324.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, there are some traditions which underline the importance of Sura 95:

God will endow, in this world, the qualities of safety and certainty to the person who recites it [Sura Tîn]. And, when he dies, He will give him rewards equal to the reward of fasting one day (multiplied) by the number of all those who have recited this Sura.<sup>34</sup>

The Apostle of God (peace be upon him) said: When one of you recites "By the fig and the olive" (Surah 95) and comes to its end "Is not God the best judge?" (verse 8), he should say: "Certainly, and I am one of those who testify to that."<sup>35</sup>

... I heard the Apostle of God (may peace be upon him) reciting in the night prayer: "By the Fig and the Olive", and I have never heard anyone with a sweeter voice than he.<sup>36</sup>

### Biblical Background

The olive tree and its fruit and oil are an integral part in the sacred symbolism of the Bible. In antiquity the fruit *par excellence* was the olive. Its tree was highly respected and had mythical qualities. In Greek mythology, the olive was a gift from the goddess Athena to humankind.<sup>37</sup> The olive was omnipresent in the biblical landscape. It was a symbol of fertility ("thy children [shall be] like olive plants round about thy table"; Ps. 128:3), beauty ("The Lord called thy name, A green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit"; Jer. 11:16), divine sanctification ("he will also bless ... thine oil"; Deut. 7:13); the olive branch was the first vegetation seen by Noah after the flood, brought by the dove ("And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth"; Gen. 8:11), and it was associated with Jesus when he dwelled on the Mount of Olives ("they went out into the mount of Olives"; Mark 14:26; "Jesus went unto the mount of Olives"; John 8:1). There was hardly an aspect of life not touched by the olive tree. Its fruit was used for food (Num. *passim*); the oil as a medicine (Isaiah 1:6; Luke 10:34); in sacrifice (Lev. 2:4; Gen. 28:18); and its wood was used for furniture (1 Kings 6:23, 31-33). Today the olive branch remains an emblem of peace and bountifulness.<sup>38</sup> The sacredness of olive oil is evident as a perfumed ointment for Kings and apparently also prophets (1 Sam. 10:1; 2 Kings 9:3; Isaiah 61:1; 1 Kings 19:16). The "messiah" (Hebrew, *mashiakh*; "anointed one") was an agent of God chosen for a mission affecting the destiny of the chosen

<sup>34</sup> Abú 'Alí al-Faḍl ibn Ḥusayn at-Tabarsí, *Majma' al-Bayán fi Tafsír al-Qur'án* (Beirut: Dár iḥyá' at-turáth al-'arabí, 1960) 10:510, cited in Sadr-'Amelí, 2:112; slightly modified.

<sup>35</sup> *Sunan Abu Dawúd*, 3:886; partial Translation of Sunan Abu-Dawúd, Book 3: Prayer (Kitáb Al-salát). <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah>>; slightly modified.

<sup>36</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, Book 4, Number 935, at *ibid.*; slightly modified.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Michael Stapleton, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1978); s.v. "Athene", 42-43.

<sup>38</sup> *The Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*; ed. Paul J. Ackermeier (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) s.v. "olive", 782, and "oil", 773.

people. Moreover, anointing the head with the precious oil was a widespread form of hospitality (Ps. 23:5; 92:10; 133:2) and consecrated the person who received it. Likewise confirmed are the uses of ointments for healing lepers (Isaiah 1:6; Luke 10:34; Jer. 8:22).<sup>39</sup>

The Mount of Olives (Hebrew, *har hazzeitim*) is a mountain overlooking Jerusalem from the east. On the third peak is the Arab village of aṭ-Ṭūr (Hebrew, *ha-har*, “the mountain”), an epithet deriving from the Aramaic “Tura Zita,” the name of the Mount of Olives.<sup>40</sup> “According to tradition, 70 000 prophets died here of starvation and are buried there.”<sup>41</sup> Rabbinic tradition maintained that the olive branch was brought to Noah from the Mount of Olives, which escaped the flood. An area of the mountain was appropriately called Gethsemane (Hebrew, “oil press”), perhaps being a garden area where the olive fruit was processed to oil (cf. John 18:1). Jesus frequently prayed here (Matt. 26:36; Mark 14:32; Luke 22:39-46). Pilgrims, like Jesus, who could not find quarters in the city, stayed on the Mount of Olives (John 18:1; Luke 22:39). Burial inside the city was prohibited, so the mount was gradually filled with tombs, in part owing to the belief that on the last day the dead would rise to gaze on the holy place. The New Testament refers to this mount as “a great and high mountain”, the place from which the “holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God” is observed (Rev. 21:10). The relationship of the mount with the departure and return of the “glory of God” provides the scenery for the ascension of Jesus and of his promised return (Luke 24:50; Acts 1:12).<sup>42</sup> Jesus often went up on top of the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). His famous “Olivet prophecy” is named after it (Matthew 24:1-51). The entry of Jesus riding on a donkey into Jerusalem took place over and down the Mount of Olives (Luke 19:28-44). Jesus prayed with his disciples there just before his arrest (Luke 22:39-46), during which Peter beat the servant of the high priest with a sword and cut off his ear (Luke 22:49-51). And Jesus became visible to His disciples on the Mount of Olives after his Resurrection, and he ascended into heaven from there (Acts 1:1-12).

There are many references to fig trees, its leaves and fruit in the Bible. Adam and Eve clothed themselves in fig leaves (Gen 3:7), and the prophet Isaiah gave orders to apply figs to someone’s boil which was cured immediately (2 Kings 20:7). To dwell under a fig tree represents a time of happiness, safety and prosperity (1 Kings 4:25).

### ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary on Sura 95

‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs the addressee that although the “people of truth” (*ahl-i haqiqat*) do accept the traditional interpretations of the famous Muslim commentators of the first verse of Sura 95 (see above), they “have carefully examined this blessed verse and unravelled therein other far-reaching meanings.” He identifies the “Fig” as Mount Tíiná, and the “Olive” as Mount Zaytá’, “two blessed mounts” in the vicinity of Jerusalem where God has honoured his prophets with his manifestation. Mount Sinai is the “dayspring of God’s boundless grace” where the divine signs were disclosed to Moses.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. “messiah”, 677-79, and “ointments and perfumes”, 773-76.

<sup>40</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem/N.Y.: MacMillan, 1971-72) 12:482.

<sup>41</sup> C Bosworth, “al-Ṭūr”, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (EI2), 10:663-64; “Ṭūr Zaytā”, 10:664.

<sup>42</sup> *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Olives, Mount of”, 782-83.



Contrary to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's<sup>43</sup> and traditional Islamic interpretations, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "the City of security" is Medina (*Madína-yi munavvarih*), where Muḥammad had migrated, and "the centre of the manifestation of Islam and the designated point where the Word of God had been raised."

In other places, and in reference to Bahá'u'lláh's Arabic *Lawḥu'r-Ra'is* addressed to Âli Pasha, which states, "O Chief! We have disclosed Ourselves to thee (*tajallayná 'alayka*) once at Mount Tíná, and once at Mount Zaytá', and at this blessed [Sinaitic] Spot (*al-buq'a al-mubáraka*),"<sup>44</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that Tíná and Zaytá' are two mountains near Jerusalem where prophets have perceived God's self-disclosure (*tajallí*), and that this is evident in the holy books, if perused. But the "ignoble Chief" (*ra'is-i khasís*) remained negligent and inattentive (*gháfil va dháhil*) of the divine revelation at this "blessed [Sinaitic] spot." According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the meaning of Tíná is the reality of Jesus (*ḥaqíqat-i 'Ísá*) and by Zaytá' the reality of Muḥammad (*ḥaqíqat-i Muḥammadiyyih*) is intended, where the "blessed Olive Tree ... neither of the East nor of the West whose Oil is well nigh Luminous, ..." is planted. God swears by these mountains and "this City of security", here meaning Mecca, as loci of manifestations.<sup>45</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá's summary of Sura 95 in his Ottoman tablet is as follows: God swears by Mount Tíná (*Túr-i Tíná*), Mount Zaytá' (*Túr-i Zaytá'*), Mount Sinai (*Túr-i Síná*) and "this City of security" (*hádhá'l-baladí'l-amín*) that he has created the reality and temple of man in the "best of moulds" (*aḥsan taqwím*). Although other creatures and all of creation are the manifestations of clear signs (of God), only man embodies the signs and the reality of the divine perfections collectively. Man is the greatest demarcation (*barzaḳh*), the archetype of the macrocosm, i.e. of all the worlds of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that only humankind is privileged by divine messengers who hold the station of prophethood, and saints merely appear in the world of humanity. "Infinite sciences are manifested in the heart of man; divine discoveries become evident in the mirror of man; so are the discoveries of mysteries the effect of human intelligence; the philosophical sciences are human talents, and marvellous divine arts are the result of the hand of man." Through the power of mental faculties and talents, the reality of all things in creation, the intrinsic worth of human beings, and the mysteries in creation, first hidden in the imaginary world, will be discovered and appear in the visible plane.<sup>46</sup>

That human beings have been created in the "best form" (*aḥsan taqwím*) and that

<sup>43</sup> See below, and 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Asmání* (Tehran: Mu'assih-i Millí-yi Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, B.E. 129/1972-73) 9:8-9.

<sup>44</sup> My translation; Bahá'u'lláh, *Alwáḥ Ḥaḍrat Bahá'u'lláh ilá'l-mulúk wa'r-ru'asá'* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bahá'í Brasil, 140 BE/1983) 66. Shoghi Effendi says that Bahá'u'lláh here identifies his Revelation with the Revelations of Moses and of Jesus (*God Passes By* 174). See also, Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Asmání* 5:48, where the "ra'is" is depicted as Âli Pasha who was the cause of the exile from Iraq to the Ottoman province of Eflak (Rumelia) and from there to the prison of 'Akká.

<sup>45</sup> Fáḡíl Mázandarání, *Amr va Kḥalq* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, B.E. 141/1984-85) 2:193-94. One Bahá'í interpretation of the four places holds that Abraham's manifestation was on the Mount of Figs, Jesus' on the Mount of Olives, Moses' on Mount Sinai, and Muḥammad's in Mecca; the author says that the figurative verses in Qur'án 95 become apparent by considering the passages in Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 62-65, regarding those four Prophets; see Muhammad Mustafa, *Bahá'u'lláh: The Great Announcement of the Qur'án* (Dhaka/Bangladesh: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.) xi.

<sup>46</sup> *MAMT*, 150-152.

they are a *barzakh*, “demarcation” or “barrier,” is indicative of their destiny. Creation, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is collectively a manifestation of divine signs, but only human beings are honoured with excellence and the entirety of faculties. “He is a most great sign, a most mighty talisman, a most perfect manifestation, a comprehensive source of enlightenment, a manifest light, a mighty mountain, a dawning-place of the names [of God], a dayspring of the exalted attributes [of God], an all-comprehensive demarcation (*barzakh-i jámi*’), a place where the two seas meet (*multaqá bahrayn*),<sup>47</sup> a confluence of the two rivers (*majma ‘-i nahrayn*), and together with being a centre where the lights of reality are diffused, he is a mine of dark malice.” If spiritual powers are victorious over physical constraints, individuals can become heavenly, a source of love. But if the sensual side and carnal senses dominate, human beings become a mine of darkness, a source of deceit, a manifestation of ignorance and wickedness.<sup>48</sup>

The terminology ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses echoes the philosophy of the great Andalusian Muslim scholar Muhyí’-d-Dín Ibn al-‘Arabí (d. 638/1240), who commented extensively on the term *barzakh* in connection with his concept of *al-insán al-kámil* (“the Perfect Man”). *Barzakh* can be translated as “isthmus,” “obstacle,” “hindrance,” and “separation,” and occurs three times in the Qur’án.<sup>49</sup> In the Qur’án, *barzakh* has a moral and concrete meaning. It can refer to the barrier between paradise and hell or represent the grave connecting the earthly life and the next world. In the Illuminationist philosophy (*Ishraqiyya*) of Suhrawardí “al-Maqtúl” (d. 1191), *barzakh*, i.e. the mortal body, is inherently dark, and through receiving the light of the spirit it becomes light.<sup>50</sup> In the theology of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsá’í, *barzakh* is the “realm of similitudes” (*‘alam-i mithál*) and equal to *Hurqalyá* or the “realm of the subtle.” It is a “purgatorial realm,”<sup>51</sup> a world between the material (*‘alam-i mulk*) and the spiritual (*‘alam-i malakút*).<sup>52</sup>

For Ibn al-‘Arabí, God, the nondelimited being, has his fullest manifestation in the “Perfect Man,” that is to say, all his names and attributes are displayed in human perfection. The comprehensiveness of the existence of the Perfect Man must be searched for in the countless intermediate worlds of his heart that are between “his sensory shell and his divine kernel.” In reality, human beings are the *barzakh al-barázikh*, the “Barzakh of the barzakhs,” the transitional realm which encompasses all interworlds, the gap which fills the realm between the Absolute Being and absolute nothingness. Human beings are in themselves the macrocosm, i.e., their individual bodies, and the microcosm, their hearts. A human is the archetype of the cosmos, *al-kawn al-jámi*’, “the all-comprehensive engendered thing” who is the locus of the totality of God’s names. Man

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Qur’án 55:19.

<sup>48</sup> *MAMT*, 55-56.

<sup>49</sup> 23:102, 25:55, 55:20. Cf. *farsakh* in Persian, a measure of distance.

<sup>50</sup> B. Carra de Vaux, “Barzakh”, *Encyclopedia of Islam (EI)*, 1:1071-72.

<sup>51</sup> In the recently published *Encyclopedia of the Qur’án* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 1:204-207, it is stated by Mona M. Zaki that most scholars hesitate to label it as purgatory, preferring the term limbo. Other academic writers in recent years have made the same point. The translation “purgatory” is too Christian-rooted and indicates a phenomenon not precisely indicated by the Qur’anic term *barzakh*.

<sup>52</sup> Vahid Rafati, *The Development of Shaykhi Thought in Shi’i Islam* (doctoral thesis, UCLA, 1979) 107, 108, 113.

turns round about God, and cosmos turns around the "Perfect Man."<sup>53</sup> In Sufism, man, attaining spiritual perfection on his path to God, first has a *nafs-i ammárih*, an inordinate soul which commands him to behave immorally; then it becomes a *nafs-i lawwámih*, a still unsubmitive soul which blames itself for its own shortcomings, and at the end of his journey he reaches the station of *nafs-i muṭma'innih*, of an obedient soul at peace.<sup>54</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

The human spirit (*rúh-i insáni*), in other words the rational soul (*nafs-i nátiqih*), in the world of existence is the intermediary between things corporeal (disengaged – *mujarradát*) and delimited worldly things (*mutahayyizát*); that is to say, between realities spiritual and things corporeal. From one vantage point it possesses spiritual refinement while from the other it exhibits the crassness of carnality, animalistic traits and worldly characteristics. It is neither an absolute abstraction nor is it completely of the world but is the confluence of two seas (*majma' al-bahrayn*), and a *barzakh* between two realities (*amrayn*). If the spiritual aspect dominates it becometh lofty, luminous, merciful, tranquil (*muṭma'innih*), contented (*raḍiyyih*) and approved (*marḍiyyih*). And if it is contaminated with contingent, worldly concerns, it becometh immersed in the ocean of darkness, reproachful (*lawwámih*), commanding to evil (*ammárih*) and residing in the nethermost regions of the world of existence. It is thus the case that the human spirit has two aspects. If the luminous aspect of the human intellect overcometh the world of nature, it will acquire the power of discovery, which is the basis for wondrous insights, and become informed about the realities and the characteristics of things. From this brief explanation perceive the detailed significances.<sup>55</sup>

The "Perfect Man" is the foremost thing God has created, the "primordial and original theophany (*tajallí*) of the Essence."<sup>56</sup> Jámí quotes Ibn al-'Arabí, defining the "Perfect Man": "Man is like 'an isthmus between the world and God, bringing together and embracing both the creatures and Him. Man is the dividing line between the shadow and the sun. This is his reality."<sup>57</sup> All beings in the world are seats (*maḥall-i istiwa'*) of the manifestation of particular divine names and attributes but only man is the place of the expression for the "universal Name", i.e., Alláh, which embraces all other names.

<sup>53</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabí's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) 30.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. William C. Chittick, "The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jámí", *Studia Islamica* 49 (1979): 135-57. There are more stations attributed to man in his spiritual journey: *nafs-i raḍiyyih* (a submissive, content soul), *nafs-i marḍiyyih* (a laudable soul), *nafs-i mulhamih* (an inspired soul), and *nafs-i dhakiyyih* (a pure, virtuous soul); see M. Zeki Pakalín, *Osmanli Tarih Deyimleri ve Terimleri Sözlüğü* (Dictionary of Ottoman Historical Idioms and Terms), (Istanbul 1993) 2:673-4.

<sup>55</sup> Provisional translation of a tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Mirzá Qábil of Abadih, *Star of the West* (Persian section), 5.7:110. Translation posted by J. Vahid Brown to the Bahá'í Studies discussion list "Daira al-Marifa" ([http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Daira\\_al-Marifat/message/1230](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Daira_al-Marifat/message/1230)), 11 July 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Chittick, "The Perfect Man" 138.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 152 f.

The following passage from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reminiscent of Ibn al-'Arabi's esoteric interpretation of *barzakh*:

For the inner reality of man is a demarcation line (*barzakh*) between the shadow and the light; a place where the two seas meet,<sup>58</sup> it is the lowest point on the arc of descent,<sup>59</sup> and therefore is it capable of gaining all the grades above. With education it can achieve all excellence; devoid of education it will stay on, at the lowest point of imperfection.<sup>60</sup>

To summarise, through the connection of the "sea" of the celestial world and the "sea" of the terrestrial world in the reality of man, a reality which forms the *barzakh* between them, man can produce treasures and bounties. Man is created after the image of God, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). If he turns to God's light, reflected by his messengers, he is worthy of his creation in the "best of moulds". If he refuses, he will be abased to the "lowest of the low" and will be brought to reckoning on the Judgment Day.

Overall, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's brief commentary, we see two themes that recur in Bahá'í interpretations. The first is the emphasis placed on the multiplicity of meanings in scripture, and the prominence given in Bahá'í tafsir to allegorical interpretations. The second is how Bahá'í interpretations focus the reader on the ethical and spiritual development of human beings.

<sup>58</sup> Qur'án 25:55, 35:13, 55:19-25.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) 328-9.

<sup>60</sup> The following sentence reads: "Every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance." (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* [Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982] 130). The position of man in creation in Ibn al-'Arabi's philosophy is expressed in the Neoplatonic terms of the "descending/ascending arc," to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá alludes in this passage.

**Provisional Translation of  
'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Tablet of the Fig and the Olive"<sup>1</sup>**

**He is God!**

Thou hast inquired about the subtle meanings of the blessed verse "By the Fig and the Olive."<sup>2</sup> As thine excellency well knoweth, the most eminent commentators have interpreted this verse by stating that the fig cometh from a goodly tree, that it hath numerous benefits beyond its exceeding sweetness, and doth in particular constitute an efficacious and wholesome medicine against chest diseases, and that it is therefore an excellent fruit. As to the olive, it is, according to the explicit verses of God, the fruit of a blessed tree. These two fruits, being the expression of God's highest bounty, have therefore been chosen for an oath.

Such is the view that hath been expounded and considered sufficient in the literal interpretations. While confirming such interpretations, the people of truth, they who consider the hidden realities and inner significances, have carefully examined this blessed verse and unravelled therein other far-reaching meanings.

One of them is this: In the sight of God, the most hallowed, the most blessed and most auspicious of all spots are the dawning-places of the Divine effulgences and the centres of the Divine blessings. Accordingly, "by the Fig" alludeth to Mount Tíiná and "by the Olive" to Mount Zaytá, which are situated on either side of Jerusalem. Both of these blessed mounts are in the Holy Land, for they are the places the exalted Prophets of God have used and received inspiration therein, and have been illumined with the effulgent lights of the Spirit. Thus have these mounts become the dayspring of the God's boundless grace.

After these two places, reference is made to Mount Sinai, where Moses, peace be upon Him, was manifested, and which therefore hath become the dawning-place of the splendours of the Divine verses and the day-spring of the Divine favours. Moreover, the city of Medina, the Secure City, hath been extolled as the place of the migration of Him Who is the Pride of the Messengers—upon Him rest salutations and praise—as the centre of the blessings of Islam, as the headquarters of its spiritual conquests, and as the spot wherein the Word of God hath been exalted. Thus the reference made to these blessed spots in the latter part of the verse proveth that the places mentioned earlier are also the seats of Divine effulgences.

The sublime meaning of these blessed verses is this: I swear by Mount Tíiná, Mount Zaytá, Mount Sinai, and this Secure City, which are the most blessed and honoured of all places in the sight of God, the source of His effulgent glories, and the site of the fervent supplications of His Prophets, that I have created the human temple and the reality of man in the most excellent form, and according to the most perfect order and arrangement. That is, while other creatures, and indeed the entirety of creation, are the manifestations of God's clear tokens, only the excellent figure of man representeth His

<sup>1</sup> This tablet is untitled. Translated by Necati Alkan, and revised by Hamid Samandari.

<sup>2</sup> Qur'án 95:1

most luminous sign and the sum of all Divine perfections. For he is the most great demarcation, the archetype of the greater world, the luminous Book,<sup>3</sup> the manifestation of the splendours of the Realms above,<sup>4</sup> the Inscribed Tablet,<sup>5</sup> and the Outspread Roll.<sup>6</sup> He it is who hath been made the recipient of the holy verse: "Read thine own record: Sufficient is thy soul in this day to make out an account against thee."<sup>7</sup>

Consider that the lights of prophethood have shone forth only above the horizon of mankind, and that the lamp of vice-regency hath been lit only within the glass of humanity. Infinite sciences have been manifested in the human heart; divine discoveries have been reflected in the mirror of man. Thus, the discovery of the hidden realities is due to human thought; the philosophical sciences are a favour vouchsafed unto man; the wonders of divine arts and crafts are his handiwork. Nay, the realities of all things, the natures of all beings, and the mysteries of the entire creation, which have been concealed in the invisible plane, are brought to light through his mental faculties and as the result of his activity. In sum, these virtues, qualities, and perfections are solely reserved for the reality of man, who is the essence of creation.

This letter is but a short and modest interpretation of this holy verse. Should a complete analysis and interpretation of its exalted meanings be desired, it would require a mighty book and a lengthy treatise. In view of thy well-wisher's exceeding weakness, frailty, grief, and sorrow, I have contented myself with this brief commentary and explanation. Given my fatigue after last night's meal, (as saith the holy tradition "When the stomach is filled, wisdom becometh silent"<sup>8</sup>); and the late night conversation with the friends, and since I had no time to write this letter myself, I caught his excellency Nesib Effendi and dictated it to him. Therefore, I beg thy forgiveness.

‘Abbás

<sup>3</sup> *Kitáb mubín*; cf. Qur'án 43:2, 44:2.

<sup>4</sup> *'Illiyún* occurs in Qur'án 83:18-19.

<sup>5</sup> *Lawh mastúr*; cf. Qur'án 52:2, *kitáb mastúr*.

<sup>6</sup> *Raqq manshúr*; cf. Qur'án 52:3.

<sup>7</sup> Qur'án, 17:14.

<sup>8</sup> *Idha mala 'at al-mi'da kharasat al-hikma*.