

Behold the Man: Baha'u'llah on the Life of Jesus

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IN THE VIEW OF THE nineteenth-century Iranian prophet, Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), the major world-religions were founded by "Manifestations of God" (sing *mazhar-i ilahi*), theophanies who mirrored forth the names and attributes of God on the human plane. These previous divine Manifestations included Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Bab in the West, and Zoroaster and the Hindu figures in the East. Jesus of Nazareth was important for Baha'u'llah in a number of ways, and he cited the New Testament occasionally. Such references were rare among Muslim thinkers, who, on the whole, regarded the New Testament text as unreliable and corrupt and found its language about Jesus incompatible with the Qur'an and Muslim theology. Why did Baha'u'llah break with this Muslim tradition of excluding the actual Bible from religious discourse? I will look for the answer to this question in three areas. First, I will examine the lessons that might have been learned from the Judeo-Christian experience for the founder of a new, post-Islamic religion. Second, I will look at the way in which many of Baha'u'llah's references to Jesus are characterized by presentism, insofar as he invokes Christ to illuminate a contemporary situation within Babi-Baha'i history. Third, I will ask what the implications were of Baha'u'llah's approach to Jesus for his relations with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Christians.

The position of Christians and Christianity had changed enormously in Iran during the first half of the nineteenth century. The encroachments of the Russian and British Empires, their concern with the welfare of local Christians, the establishment of missionary schools, and some Iranian Christians' own involvement in commerce with Europe, all set this community apart. In consequence, some educated Iranians took a new interest in the history and doctrines of Christianity, and even some clerics investigated the religion in order to refute visiting missionaries such as

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Henry Martyn (Algar:82-102, Ariyan:92-95). As a nineteenth-century Persian from a Shi'ite culture, Baha'u'llah inherited a number of images of Jesus—from the Qur'an, from the Persian Sufi mystics, and from Shi'ite texts, as well as from nineteenth-century Arabic printings of the New Testament. These perspectives had been seen by many Muslim authors as incompatible, and their juxtaposition raises many thorny questions. How did Baha'u'llah navigate his way among diverse sources to create a new intertextuality (a new set of texts read against one another)? What were his views of the seminal events in Jesus' life?

The Babi movement began in 1844 in Shiraz, Iran, with the declaration of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad (1819-1850) that he had a special divine calling as the "*Bab*" or intermediary between God and humans, ultimately he asserted that he was the Mahdi or promised one of Islam. The Bab was eventually arrested for heresy and imprisoned in fortresses in Iran's northwest. In 1848 at Tabriz he was examined by the Shi'ite clergy in the presence of the heir apparent and declared a heretic worthy of death. The Bab revealed his own holy book, the *Bayan*, to supplant the Qur'an, and laid great stress on the coming of a further messianic figure after him, "He whom God shall make manifest." In 1850 the Iranian state had the Bab executed at the public square in Tabriz in the wake of outbreaks of violence between Shi'ites who rejected the Bab and the 100,000 or so who had accepted him. In 1852 a cabal of Babis in Tehran attempted to assassinate Nasru'd-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896) but failed. The shah launched a nationwide pogrom against the Babis that left thousands dead and drove the religion underground. Among those arrested at this time was Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri, known as Baha'u'llah, an increasingly prominent Babi leader and thinker from a noble background. Found innocent of involvement in the plot, he was nevertheless exiled to Baghdad. There in 1863 Baha'u'llah declared himself the promised one of the Bab, and of all religions. In the same year the Ottoman government brought him to Istanbul, then rusticated him to Edirne in Rumelia. In 1868 he was further exiled to the pestiferous city of Acre ('Akka) on the coast of Ottoman Syria, where he lived until his death in 1892. Baha'u'llah's main teachings focused on the unity of the world religions and the need for world unity, collective security, and peace. His community in Iran grew by the 1890s to between 50,000 and 100,000 in a population of eight or nine million, most of them apparently artisans, merchants, and members of the new middle class, though village peasants were also represented. The Baha'i faith, has since spread to virtually every country in the world and numbers some 5.5 million adherents in the mid-1990s (Cole 1992; Smith; Smith and Momen).

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Although there has not been one monolithic Muslim approach to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, most Muslim thinkers have been so convinced that these texts were corrupted (Ar. *tahḥīf*) after the advent of Islam that they have been loathe to refer to them. It seems clear, as Hava Lazarus-Yafeh has argued, that exact quotation of biblical texts is extremely rare in medieval Muslim writing, and that “only if we assume that these authors had no direct access to a written Arabic translation of the Bible . . . can we understand this strange phenomenon” (113). Yet Baha’u’llah did accept the authenticity of the extant New Testament. Why? Before attempting to answer this question, let us examine the issue in Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) was familiar with oral Christian traditions, and the Qur’an retells the stories of the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus, perhaps working from Syriac Christian folk motifs (which emphasize the Lucan nativity narratives), and possibly from extra-canonical infancy Gospels (Robinson.15-22). The Qur’an speaks of the revelation given to Jesus as the *Injil*, an Arabic word derived from the Greek *euangelion* (“good news”), praising it as full of guidance and light and as a confirmation of the Torah (Q. 5:49-50). Muslims who believe in the corruption of the text do not identify the *Injil* praised in the Qur’an with the New Testament, which they believe distorted (Parrinder:142-151). Still, there is evidence that the Qur’an itself employs the word *Injil* to indicate the New Testament text, since it instructs the Christians to judge according to what God has revealed in the “Gospel” and speaks (7:156) of it as being “written” (*maktub*^{an}) and “in their possession” (*indahum*).

Once an Islamic state and civilization had been established, the majority of Muslim scholars rejected the existing manuscripts of the New Testament, along with those of the Hebrew Bible, as inauthentic and textually corrupt. This doctrine depended upon an interpretation of the Qur’an, which says, “Some of the Jews pervert words from their meanings . . . twisting with their tongues and traducing religion” (4:46). Most Muslim authors construed such verses to mean that the Jews (and by analogy Christians) actually changed the text of the Bible. A minority of great scholars, such as Tabari and Ibn Khaldun, suggested that this corruption of the text referred solely to how it was read and interpreted, not to tampering with the written words themselves.

The issue of access to the text changed radically in the nineteenth century, when for the first time Protestant missionaries had Bibles printed

and distributed (Bible in Arabic; Saliba). Baha'u'llah championed the minority view by upholding the textual integrity of the Bible in his *Book of Certitude*, written at Baghdad in 1862 for a member of the prominent Afnan merchant family, an uncle of the Bab, Sayyid Muhammad Afnan Shirazi (Baha'u'llah 1970, 1980a; Collins; Buck 1995). He notes that most Muslim clergymen dismiss the Bible as textually corrupt, but he insists that the Qur'an referred only to changes in law and custom introduced by the post-exilic Jews, for instance, ceasing the biblical practice of stoning adulterers. He adds,

Can a man who believeth in a book, and deemeth it to be inspired by God, mutilate it? Moreover, the Pentateuch hath been spread over the surface of all the earth, and was not confined to Mecca and Medina, so that they could privily corrupt and pervert its text. Nay, rather, by corruption of the text is meant that in which all Muslim divines are engaged today, that is the interpretation of God's holy Book in accordance with their idle imaginings and vain desires (Baha'u'llah, 1970 86; 1980a 67)

To believe in both the Bible and the Qur'an was seldom attempted and that Baha'u'llah did so profoundly affected his image of Jesus. The Qur'an remains a touchstone for many of Baha'u'llah's references to Jesus, despite his familiarity with and willingness to cite the Gospels themselves. It now functions as a sermon-like commentary, however, supplementing New Testament perspectives rather than displacing them altogether.

Baha'u'llah makes it clear that he did not find the mainstream Muslim theory of textual corruption plausible on rational grounds. What other, unstated, motivations might he have had? At this point he had no real missiological reasons for wishing to please Christians. Most Iranian Christians were Armenians or Nestorians, and they had neither become Babis nor did these local Christians ever show much interest in the Baha'i faith, unlike Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians, who converted in substantial numbers. The *Book of Certitude* was addressed to a Shi'ite Muslim. Still, the New Testament was potentially important for the new religion in a number of ways. Its eschatological emphasis on Christ's return and the clearly symbolic nature of Jesus' parables and prophecies resonated powerfully with Shi'ite esotericism and expectations about the rise of a divinely-guided Mahdi and the return of Jesus at the End-Time. In constituting a largely spiritual document that was held by Christians to have abrogated a law-oriented Torah, the New Testament offered Baha'u'llah a model for moving away from the emphasis on Islamic law (*shari'ah*) that pervaded urban, literate Shi'ite culture, as well as a precedent for abrogating such an elaborated legal code. The emphasis on redemptive suffering in the New Testament, centering on a prophetic figure, justified the combination in the Babi-Baha'i movement of two strains of Shi'ite spiri-

tuality that had been separate reverence for Muhammad as the founder of the dispensation and conviction that mourning the Prophet's martyred grandson Husayn was redemptive. Folk Shi'ism taught that merely weeping for Imam Husayn (d. 680) was enough to ensure one's entrance into paradise (Fischer: 13-27; Chelkowski). Jesus' passion opened up the possibility that the site of redemption could be a prophetic figure and so helped justify and infuse with meaning the martyrdom of the Bab and the imprisonments of Baha'u'llah. Of himself, Baha'u'llah wrote, "The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty" (1976:99, 1984:71).

JESUS' EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Let us examine how Baha'u'llah deals with the major events and themes in the life of Jesus. Baha'u'llah refers to the virgin birth in his *Book of Certitude* in the course of an argument for the humanity of past holy figures. The uncle of the Bab had inquired as to why the Bab, if he were truly the Mahdi or promised one of Islam, had failed to establish his sovereignty. In reply, Baha'u'llah says that most holy figures of the past had been subject to worldly humiliations, pointing to Moses' flight after being accused of murder and calling attention to Mary's predicament when it became known that she was with child. "Likewise," he writes, "reflect upon the state and condition of Mary. So deep was the perplexity of that most beautiful countenance, so grievous her case, that she bitterly regretted she had ever been born" (Baha'u'llah 1980a:44-45, 1970:56-57). As hinted in the Qur'an (19:22-28), the nativity is here not a sentimental Christmas tale but a social scandal that plunges the young mother into despair. Yet her faith and steadfastness are rewarded, since her son was made a prophet by God.

As for Jesus' birth, Baha'u'llah cites it in connection with his argument that the advent of each Manifestation of God has been marked both by celestial phenomena such as the appearance of a comet or star and by a symbolic "star" in the form of a charismatic human precursor. The archetype for this conjunction of celestial and human signs is clearly the nativity story. Baha'u'llah, quoting Matthew 2:2, speaks of how the star was followed to the realm of Herod, to Bethlehem, by some Zoroastrians (*majus*). Baha'u'llah's Iranian audience may have felt this showed their forebears' involvement with the Nativity (Baha'u'llah 1970:64; 1980a:49-50).

Baha'u'llah maintained that each major Manifestation of God was also preceded by a precursor who had attained the mystical state called by the

Sufis the “perfect person” (*insan-i kamil*). In the Babi religion the harbingers were Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i (d. 1826) and Sayyid Kazim Rashti (d. 1844), and the Prophet Muhammad’s advent was foreseen by such seekers as the Zoroastrian Ruz-Bih, who became known as Salman. John the Baptist played this role in Christianity. Baha’u’llah writes, “As to the sign in the invisible heaven—the heaven of divine knowledge and understanding—it was Yahya [John], son of Zechariah, who gave unto the people the tidings of the Manifestation of Jesus” (Baha’u’llah 1970:64, 1980a:44-45). He quotes Qur’an 3:39, “God announceth Yahya to thee, who shall bear witness unto the Word from God, and a great one and chaste,” explaining that the “Word” here is Jesus himself. He then quotes Mt. 3:1-2 on John the Baptist’s preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

The *Book of Certitude* was written in 1862, a year or so before Baha’u’llah declared himself to be the messianic figure, “He whom God shall make manifest,” foretold by the Bab. Baha’u’llah went on to found his own religion and in 1873 revealed a new, concise book of laws. The Bab was considered both by Babis and Baha’is an independent Manifestation of God who had revealed a legal system, and some Babis found it difficult to accept that it should have been abrogated so soon. At this point, the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus took on a new resonance for Baha’u’llah and his followers, since John was recognized in Islam as an independent prophet (Parrinder: 48). That John and Jesus could appear so closely together suggested that there was nothing anomalous in sacred history about two Manifestations of God having been contemporaneous. In one passage Baha’u’llah says that the son of Zechariah began performing baptisms by immersion and preaching repentance because the kingdom of heaven was at hand, quoting Mt. 4:11. He points out that John admits that Jesus is mightier than he, despite their being contemporaries, though the Baptist does so allusively since Jesus’ own mission had not yet been made manifest. He glosses “he who is coming after me” as “he who shall manifest himself after me.” He then cites Mt. 4:13 on John’s baptism of Jesus.

Baha’u’llah points out that baptism originated with John and was his teaching, which the Christians adopted and carried on, and it appears that his point here is that Baha’is are hardly innovating in continuing some Babi practices. He says that the fragrance of these days (the simultaneous appearance of two Manifestations of God) also wafted in those, for the Bab also foretold the coming of his contemporary, Baha’u’llah (Ishraq-Khavarī 1971-73, 7:228-229). Elsewhere, Baha’u’llah says that John the Baptist, like the Bab, came to prepare the people of the world for his successor (Baha’u’llah 1892:95-96; cf. Crossan: 237-238). Other Babis appear to have criticized Baha’u’llah for moving too slowly in sup-

planting Islamic and Babi law, and here too he appealed to the example of Jesus, saying that even relatively late in his preaching career he only abrogated some laws of the Torah, as a kindness to Jews who would otherwise find it impossible to accept him, and that, if he had begun with such abrogations, his crucifixion would have occurred much earlier (Baha'u'llah 1890-1978:6,102).

Baha'u'llah believed that a friction developed between the followers of Jesus and John and that it was paralleled by the rancor felt toward the Baha'is by the tiny minority of Babis who did not accept Baha'u'llah. He writes, "They that have turned aside from Me have spoken even as the followers of John (the Baptist) spoke. For they, too, protested against Him Who was the Spirit (Jesus) saying: 'The dispensation of John hath not yet ended; wherefore hast thou come?' (Baha'u'llah 1971a:157, 1982:102) " New Testament scholars have also suggested that a certain amount of tension developed between John's followers and those of Jesus, based on Jn. 3 and 4; that a Baptist sect existed in its own right is indicated by Acts 18:24-28. The Mandaean or "Sabean" sect of Iraq, a Gnostic group, gave some honor to John the Baptist in order to fit into the Islamic legal framework of a "People of the Book" with their own prophet. It is not impossible that Baha'u'llah came into contact with them (and with the sentiment he paraphrases above) while living in Baghdad (Fredriksen, 24-25; Drower).

The narratives of Jesus' birth and baptism inevitably contained within them implicit legitimations of the Babi break with Islam and the Baha'i evolution out of Babism. As read in an Islamic culture, which expected a succession of messengers of God, they underlined that God was ever ready to speak again to his covenantal communities but that such a new advent always risked scandal (the virgin birth) and succession conflicts (as between the followers of the Baptist and the Christians). Baha'u'llah employs images of Jesus' birth and baptism in a presentist fashion to help make Babis and Baha'is of the nineteenth century comfortable with aspects of their own history. Just as the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus was complex, with Jesus acknowledging John's being from God by accepting baptism from him but later expressing approval of only some aspects of John's teachings, so the relationship between the Bab and Baha'u'llah is one of both recognition and abrogation.

JESUS' TEACHINGS AND MIRACLES

Baha'u'llah cites Jesus as an example of a Manifestation of God who lacked material riches and honors. As noted, the uncle of the Bab was perplexed by his nephew's lack of sovereignty, just as many Jews in the

time of Jesus found it difficult to accept a crucified Messiah. Baha'u'llah points out that a number of holy figures revered by Shi'ite Muslims suffered afflictions in this world and that even the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imam Husayn, was brutally martyred by the Umayyad government in 680 CE when he attempted to lead an uprising against it.

As a result of Jesus' itinerant style of life and his disdain for worldly goods (e.g., Mk. 10:21, Mt. 10:9-10), Sufi mystics in Islam saw him as the perfect ascetic. Many sayings of such a tenor were attributed to him or adopted into Sufi and esoteric Shi'ite literature from Christian ascetics, among whom they circulated orally (King; Nurbaksh; Ayoub 1976). It has been suggested that a few of these Arabic *logia* or sayings may actually preserve extra-canonical material valued by the early Eastern churches. Baha'u'llah occasionally quoted these Sufi narratives about Jesus, retelling, for instance, the story of how Jesus and his disciples came upon a dead dog. While the others recoiled at the smell, Jesus found something good to say about the creature, admiring his white teeth (Baha'u'llah in Ishraq-Khavarī 1971-73, 8.128, Nurbaksh:98-100). With regard to Jesus' self-effacing mode of life, Baha'u'llah cites another such Sufi anecdote, wherein Jesus says, "My bed is the dust, my lamp in the night the light of the moon, and my steed my own feet. Behold, who on earth is richer than I?" (Baha'u'llah 1970:130-131; 1980a.100-101). Jesus is implicitly invoked as a justification for the Bab, who, like the man from Nazareth, became penniless and was arrested once he proclaimed his mission.

Neither the Qur'an (57:27) nor Baha'u'llah approved of monasticism, celibacy, and seclusion from society. Indeed, Baha'u'llah calls upon the Christian monks of his day to issue from their cloisters and marry (Baha'u'llah 1980b:32, 1988.60). He therefore rejects the image of "Jesus as monk" prevalent in medieval Europe, and he depicts this ascetic bent in Christ as a result of persecution rather than simply of choice (cf. Mt. 8:20) (Pelikan: 109-121). He wrote, "Reflect how Jesus, the Spirit of God, was, notwithstanding His extreme meekness and perfect tender-heartedness, treated by His enemies. So fierce was the opposition which He, the Essence of Being and the Lord of the visible and invisible, had to face, that He had nowhere to lay His head. He wandered continually from place to place, deprived of a permanent abode" (Baha'u'llah 1976:57; 1984.45). Jesus' asceticism is interpreted, not as a commitment to self-mortification, but as a "radical itinerancy" forced on him by the political and ecclesiastical authorities of his day (cf. Crossan 346). Again, there is a parallel with the Bab, who had to flee to Isfahan and was exiled to Mah-Ku and Chihriq. But this passage is also evocative of Baha'u'llah's own life, for he too, after his arrest in 1852, suffered a series of exiles and

persecutions that deprived him of “a permanent abode” Like Jesus, Baha’u’llah was known for his meekness and tender heart, his advocacy of peace and harmony That Jesus was subject to such victimization despite his exalted station as “Lord of the visible and invisible (*malik-i ghayb va shuhud*)” helped explain how Baha’u’llah, the promised one of the ages, could have suffered similarly.

Jesus nevertheless possessed a spiritual sovereignty This is apparent for Baha’u’llah in the Synoptic story of the healing of the paralytic, wherein Jesus cures a man and says his sins are forgiven, which Luke reports to have provoked cavilling from Pharisees Jesus in reply asks if it is easier to heal one paralyzed or to pronounce sins forgiven “that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins” (Lk 5:17-26). This story has been cited, Baha’u’llah says, so that the reader “will comprehend the inner meaning of sovereignty and the like, spoken of in the traditions and scriptures” (Baha’u’llah 1970:133-135, 1980a 103-104)

Late in his life Baha’u’llah argued that the sort of sovereignty Jesus possessed did not conflict with civil authority Jesus’ position on the relationship of his followers to the Roman empire, as reported in the Synoptics and generally interpreted by nineteenth-century Christians, was increasingly appealing for Baha’u’llah as he founded a new religion in the Middle East. He worked to have the Baha’i faith accepted, along with Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, as a minority religion under the Shah of Iran’s rule To do so, he had to convince the state that he had no plans to promote a Babi-style theocracy but rather that he accepted the validity of the civil state. In this regard, he pledged to Nasiru’d-Din Shah that Baha’is would recognize the legitimacy of his government (though he did not offer to give way on matters of principle, such as the Baha’i belief in the need for constitutional and parliamentary rule), and he cited in support of this position Mk 12:17, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” He points out that, in fact, Caesar could not have come to the throne against God’s will in any case He supports this verse with Qur’an (4:59), “Obey God and obey the Apostle, and those among you invested with authority,” which he says refers first of all to the Imams and then to secular rulers. On this theme Baha’u’llah also quotes the Apostle Paul’s (*hadrat-i Bulus-i Qiddis*) Epistle to the Romans (13:1-2), “Let every soul be subject to the higher powers . . .” (Baha’u’llah 1971a:89-91; 1982:60-61). Later Christian exegetes often interpreted Jesus’ saying about Caesar and Paul’s epistle as urging Christian quietism, this could be a means of finding acceptance, e.g., in the Roman Empire (in contrast to the Jews who revolted in the late 60s, provoking harsh Roman reprisals) Again, the

position of the Baha'is in the nineteenth-century Middle East was very similar. Just as Christians were dogged by their relationship to rebellious Jews, so Baha'is were often blamed for the turmoil of the earlier Babi period. It should also be noted here that Baha'u'llah's willingness to cite the Epistle to the Romans as authoritative is even more remarkable than his acceptance of the four Gospels, since Muslims most often saw Paul as a corruptor of Christianity and importer into it of Hellenistic ideas.

Despite his references to such stories as the healing of the paralytic to demonstrate Jesus' spiritual sovereignty, Baha'u'llah rejects a purely literal interpretation of miracle stories about Christ in the Gospels and in the Qur'an (e.g., 3:49, 5:110). He is concerned, not in a positivist fashion with what really happened, but with what the scriptures intend by such anecdotes, and he interprets Jesus' miracles as symbolic of his spiritual impact.

We testify that when He came into the world, He shed the splendor of His glory upon all created things. Through Him the leper recovered from the leprosy of perversity and ignorance. Through Him, the unchaste and wayward were healed. Through His power, born of Almighty God, the eyes of the blind were opened, and the soul of the sinner sanctified.

Leprosy may be interpreted as any veil that interveneth between man and the recognition of the Lord, his God. Whoso alloweth himself to be shut out from Him is indeed a leper, who shall not be remembered in the Kingdom of God, the Mighty, the All-Praised. We bear witness that through the power of the Word of God every leper was cleansed, every sickness was healed, every human infirmity was banished. He it is Who purified the world. Blessed is the man who, with a face beaming with light, hath turned towards Him (Baha'u'llah 1976:86, 1892:93)

In keeping with this figurative approach to hermeneutics Baha'u'llah in his *Book of Certitude* shows great interest in the idea of the kingdom of God as a present reality rather than as an eschatological idea and in Jesus' symbolic uses of words such as "life" and "death." He argues that the Resurrection Day itself may be identified as that kingdom of God and that it is not a historical, concrete event at the end of linear time but rather a symbol for the spiritual awakening that is provoked by the advent of any new Manifestation of God. He supports this view with reference to Jn. 3:7, "Ye must be born again," and Jn. 3:5, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." Thus, birth, life, and death are figurative references to humankind's existential responses to the new theophany. "The purport of these words," he says of the passages quoted from the Gospel of John, "is that whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the Manifestation of Holiness is of those that have attained unto 'life' and

'resurrection' and have entered into the 'paradise' of the love of God." Likewise, those who reject the new Messenger of God are spoken of as "dead" and consumed by "fire." He also cites Lk 9:60, where Jesus tells his disciple, whose father is dead, to "let the dead bury the dead," as a proof-text in his argument that scripture employs the word "death" symbolically rather than literally. The point is that the "resurrection" of the "dead" refers to the infusion into deadened souls of the new spiritual vigor of faith and certitude (Baha'u'llah 1970:118, 1980a.90, Nur-bakhsh.84).

Baha'u'llah's Jesus is primarily a teacher of Wisdom rather than a miracle-worker, and his teachings about the kingdom of God force him to be constantly on the move because they provoke the ire of the Establishment. Jesus' teachings and his emphasis on parables and figurative uses of words helped legitimate a number of Baha'i principles. Among the most urgent tasks facing the Babi-Baha'i preachers in Iran was to convince Muslim interlocutors that the signs of the last days mentioned in the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams should be read figuratively rather than literally. Jesus' parables and his figurative use of ideas such as "death" provided models for this apologetic task. His ascetic existence and itineracy provided an alternative model for prophecy from that of the wealthy and powerful Prophet Muhammad at the end of his life. And the politically quietist interpretation that could so easily be put upon the principle of rendering unto Caesar provided the Baha'is with a new, non-theocratic model for their relationship to the state.

JESUS' ARREST AND TRIAL

The seventh-century Meccans boycotted the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, then attempted but failed to have him assassinated, and finally fought a series of battles with him, which they lost. He thus avoided ever having been arrested or tried by them. The Bab, on the other hand, as we have seen, was both imprisoned and tried. Baha'u'llah suffered imprisonment twice—in Tehran in 1852 and in Acre in 1868-70—as well as being exiled and often kept under virtual house arrest during much of his life, though he never received a proper trial. The story of Jesus' arrest and trial therefore had many resonances with the lives of the Bab and Baha'u'llah.

In one of his meditations Baha'u'llah says his eyes were "cheered" by the tribulations God had decreed for him, and he recalls the scene of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane after the last supper and shortly before his arrest by the High Priest, paraphrasing Mk. 14:36: "He Who was Thy Spirit (Jesus), O my God, withdrew all alone in the darkness of the night

preceding His last day on earth, and falling on His face to the ground besought Thee saying, 'If it be Thy will, O my Lord, my Well-Beloved, let this cup, through thy grace and bounty, pass from Me.' By Thy bounty, O Thou Who art the Lord of all names and the Creator of the heavens! I can smell the fragrance of the words which, in His love for Thee, His lips uttered . . ." (Baha'u'llah 1971b:192-193; 1981:130-131). Here, Baha'u'llah sees in Jesus' simultaneous plea for relief and expression of resignation to the will of God an archetypal spiritual attitude, which he himself shared

Jesus' arrest and trial are scenes to which Baha'u'llah repeatedly adverts in his writings. It may be that they reminded him of the Bab's own trial in Tabriz, when the young heir apparent Nasiru'd-Din Mirza presided and the Shi'ite clergy asked the Bab questions about his claims to be the Mahdi and then declared him devoid of religion (that is, an infidel). In that trial the mujtahids or Muslim jurists represented the hierarchy, whereas the heir apparent personified secular power, and it was the clergy who issued the legal opinion (fatwa) that allowed the Bab's blood to be shed, while the government of Nasiru'd-Din carried it out two years after his succession to the throne (Amanat.385-400)

The Gospel accounts differ on the details of Jesus' arrest and trial. The Synoptics tend to depict a convocation of the Sanhedrin, or council of rabbis, but it has been pointed out that there are several difficulties with this scenario. The Sanhedrin would not have met at night (as in Mark and Matthew, which have it meet yet again after daybreak), and would not have met on Passover, and certainly not at night on Passover. In addition, that body lacked authority to try capital crimes, since Jerusalem was directly ruled by the Romans at that point. The Sanhedrin trial scene, it has been argued, must be seen more as early Christian theology (Jesus was condemned for religious rather than political reasons) than as history. The more likely account is that of John (18:3-28), who has Jesus taken from the garden of Gethsemane by a mixed group of Jewish "officers" and Roman soldiers to the house of Annas (a Jerusalem notable and the father-in-law of the Jewish High Priest Caiaphas). After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Annas and Caiaphas appear to have been distressed over the possibility that Jesus was a rebel or bandit who might be planning to lead a zealot-style revolt against the Romans. His answers did not assuage their fears, so he was taken first to the house of Caiaphas and then delivered to Pilate so that Roman justice might be imposed on him, since he had done nothing for which he could be sanctioned by the Sanhedrin (Fredriksen.116-120).

In the *Book of Certitude* Baha'u'llah draws on the Synoptic accounts of the trial, emphasizing the manner in which Jesus retained his sense of

divine authority as the Son of Man even in the midst of his humiliating questioning: "Similarly, call thou to mind the day when the Jews, who had surrounded Jesus, Son of Mary, were pressing Him to confess His claim of being the Messiah and Prophet of God, so that they might declare Him an infidel and sentence Him to death. Then, they led Him away, He Who was the Day-star of the heaven of divine Revelation, unto Pilate and Caiaphas, who was the leading divine (*a'zām-i 'ulama*) of that age. The chief priests were all assembled in the palace, also a multitude of people who had gathered to witness His sufferings, to deride and injure Him" (Baha'u'llah 1970:132-133, 1980a:102-103). When pressed to say who he is before the High Priest Caiaphas, Baha'u'llah observes, Jesus replied: "Beholdest thou not the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and might?" (a paraphrase of Mk 14.61). Baha'u'llah is struck by Christ's bold declaration of power at a time when he was to all appearances completely vulnerable (1970:133, 1980a:103). The Synoptic image of the faithless crowd at the public trial of Jesus appears elsewhere as well. When in 1879 the leading Muslim jurists of Isfahan condemned to death for their faith two prominent Baha'is, Muhammad-Hasan and Muhammad-Husayn Nahri, Baha'u'llah wrote a powerful denunciation of this act. He asked Shaykh Muhammad Baqir, whom he branded "the Wolf," "Art thou happy to see the abject and worthless as thy followers? They support thee as did a people before them, they that followed Annas, who, without clear proof and testimony, pronounced judgment against the Spirit" (1988:210, 1980b:129).

In other passages Baha'u'llah appears to draw more on John's depiction of the High Priest and his father-in-law interrogating Jesus in the latter's home. Baha'u'llah recalls the opposition met by Messengers of God such as Muhammad and Jesus, writing, "Consider the Dispensation of Jesus Christ. Behold, how all the learned men (*'ulama*) of that generation, though eagerly anticipating the coming of the Promised One, have nevertheless denied Him. Both Annas, the most learned among the divines (*'ulama*) of His day, and Caiaphas, the high priest (*aqdā al-quḍāt*), denounced Him and pronounced the sentence of His death" (1976:83, 1988:237). In the original it is clear that Baha'u'llah powerfully identifies Jesus' persecutors with the Muslim clergy of his own day, calling the rabbis "ulema" (the word for Muslim learned men of religion) and making Caiaphas a "qadī" or Muslim court judge.

In his *Most Holy Tablet*, written for the Christian community, Baha'u'llah recalls this theme again: "Call thou to mind the one who sentenced Jesus to death. He was the most learned of his age in his own country, whilst he who was only a fisherman believed in Him" (Baha'u'llah 1988:10; 1980b:4; Sours). There appears to be a shift of emphasis in

Baha'u'llah's imagery relating to the trial, from a depiction in the Babi-period *Book of Certitude* of a large gathering of Jewish rabbis in the Sanhedrin who condemned Jesus (after the Synoptic Gospels), toward a focus in the Baha'i period in Acre on Caiaphas and Annas as the chief villains of the piece (the Johannine version). This shift may reflect the changing relationship of Baha'u'llah to the Shi'ite clerics. In the early 1860s the Babi community of which he formed a part had been violently and massively suppressed by the joint action of the Shi'ite clergy and the state, partially in response to the perceived militancy of the Babis. In forming the new Baha'i religion from 1863, however, Baha'u'llah imbued it with a peaceful ethos, and while Baha'is continued to be persecuted, there was nothing like the clashes that occurred in the Babi period. In some communities it appears that Shi'ite clergymen were either sympathetic to the ideals of the Baha'is or at least willing to look the other way. Still, powerful clerics such as Shaykh Muhammad Baqir and his son Shaykh Muhammad Taqi Najafi in Isfahan persecuted Baha'is on several occasions, scapegoating them relentlessly. The Johannine account of Jesus' trial, which placed blame for his condemnation primarily on the Chief Priest and his family rather than on the entire Sanhedrin, could be evoked to signal the wickedness of a few top clerics rather than attacking the general run of Shi'ite learned men. In addition, Baha'u'llah appears not to mention Pilate after the early 1860s, placing most of the blame on the High Priest, and this emphasis may reflect his desire to effect a rapprochement between the Baha'i community and the Qajar state in Iran. In any case, the narrative of the arrest and trial of Jesus certainly helped legitimate the incarcerations and examinations suffered by the Bab and Baha'u'llah.

JESUS' CRUCIFIXION

Because Baha'u'llah endorses the New Testament text as authentic, he accepts the reality of the crucifixion, unlike most Muslim thinkers. The general Muslim unwillingness to admit that Jesus was crucified before bodily ascending into heaven is rooted in Qur'an 4.155-158, which castigates the Jews for "slaying the Prophets without right" and for their saying, "We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God"—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them." Much controversy has swirled about this difficult and ambiguous passage through the centuries. Some have alleged that the phrase *shubbiha la-hum*, "a likeness was shown to them," shows that the Qur'an accepted the doctrine of the Gnostics that someone other than Jesus mounted the cross in his stead, or that it accorded with the

Docetists, Christian heretics who denied that Jesus had a physical body. Medieval Muslim commentators developed a Borges-like “substitutionist” theory, saying that someone else was mistakenly arrested and crucified in Jesus’ stead; some suggested that it was Judas Iscariot himself. As B. Todd Lawson has underlined, the medieval exegete and theologian Fakhru’l-Din ar-Razi rejected the substitutionist theory as intrinsically unjust and unworthy of God (Lawson 1991; cf. Ayoub 1980).

Docetism in the Qur’an is unlikely. The Qur’an is nothing if not realistic about physical reality, and it at one point criticizes local Arabian Christian sectaries (Docetists or Gnostics?) for denying that Jesus and Mary ate food (5:75). It also affirms that Jesus was mortal and died (19:33). A less literal interpretation of *shubbiha la-hum* would be “it was made to appear to them [the Jews] thus.” Several plausible interpretations have been advanced along these lines. It might mean that God hardened their hearts by allowing them to think they had succeeded in having Jesus killed, when, in fact, his spirit is immortal. After all, the Qur’an forbids Muslims to say of the martyrs that they are dead. “Nay, they are living, only you are not aware” (2:154). This interpretation would fit with a later phrase in the passage, “and they slew him not of a certainty—no indeed, God raised him up to Him.” Or it might mean that they were not the actual agents in his death, rather the Romans were, and some Medinan Jews and their predecessors were under an illusion when they took credit for and boasted of this accomplishment (Parrinder 105-121; Robinson:106-141, Lawson 1991).

Some Muslims adhered to a minority view that accepted the reality of the crucifixion and passion. This was true of the tenth-century Isma’ili Shi’ite group, the Brethren of Purity, authors of the influential *Epistles* (*Rasa’il*). They argued that only Jesus’ human nature (*nasut*) was crucified and mentioned biblical details such as Jesus being offered vinegar on the cross. Sufi mystics also often suggested that it was only Jesus’ human form that was crucified, whereas his aspect as Spirit was received by God into heaven, and that the Qur’an meant only to deny the death of the Spirit (Robinson:56-57, 184, Jandi:495-512). In a less analytical vein, Persian poets sometimes referred to Jesus and his cross, appearing to accept the symbolism of the passion in their imagery (Ariyan).

In the “Surah of Blood” (*Surat ad-Dam*), written in Edirne around 1866, Baha’u’llah represents the eternal Logos that was manifest in each of the Manifestations of God as lamenting its treatment through the millennia. It speaks of Pharaoh’s persecution of Moses as well as the Imam Husayn’s death and decapitation at the hands of the forces of Yazid the Umayyad. This Logos figure, as Jesus, apostrophizes God, saying, “Thou didst lift Me up upon the cross (*arfa’tani ila as-salib*),” an

acknowledgment that God's will permitted the crucifixion (Baha'u'llah 1976 89, 1892-1978, 4 9) In the *Book of Certitude* Baha'u'llah clearly speaks of Jesus having been "persecuted and killed" (*īdhā' va qatl*) by his opponents (1980a 103)

Baha'u'llah affirms not simply the fact of Jesus on the cross but agrees with Paul in seeing the passion as redemptive In one passage he discerns a similarity among the stories of sacrifice of Abraham, Jesus, and the Imam Husayn God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his first-born had as its purpose "to sacrifice him as a ransom [*fidā'i*] for the sins and iniquities [*'isyān va khatāhā*] of all the peoples of the earth" (Baha'u'llah 1976 76, Ishraq-Khavarī 1971-73, 7 77, cf Cole 1993) He says that because of its treatment of the Prophets of God and His chosen ones all humankind deserves to perish (*halākat*) but that God's invisible and loving grace (*alīf*) has protected it from retribution The persecution of the prophets is thus both an occasion of collective sin and an occasion of grace, since the sacrificed holy figure ransoms humans from the bondage of their sins "This same honor [*maqām*], Jesus, the Son of Mary, besought the one true God to confer upon Him" (Baha'u'llah 1976 76) Since Shi'ite Islam possessed an elaborate theology of redemptive sacrifice centered on the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, it was easy enough for Baha'u'llah to meld that tradition with the New Testament preaching about Christ crucified. On the other hand, neither Islam nor the Baha'i faith accepts the idea of original sin, so that humankind is here redeemed, not from Adam's lapse but from the historical guilt of having tortured and killed the Messengers of God Another cause for which Jesus is said to sacrifice himself is the coming of the Day of God, that is, the world-historical turning-point represented by Baha'u'llah's own advent In the *Surat as-Sultan* written in the early Acre period for the Baha'is of Sultanabad, Baha'u'llah depicts Jesus upon the cross, confusedly noticing blood upon his tunic and being questioned and taunted The dove of holiness then informs him of what will befall Baha'u'llah (*al-ghulām*) when he arises in the station of Christ's return, and it is at that point that Jesus cries out and departs from this world, ascending to the presence of God (Baha'u'llah in Ishraq-Khavarī 1967 193-194)

In a letter to a Christian clergyman of Istanbul, perhaps a member of the Eastern Orthodox church, Baha'u'llah connects the crucifixion with sacrifice and with human advancement He writes, "Know thou that when the Son . . . [*al-Ibn*] yielded up His breath to God [*sallama ar-rūh*], the whole creation wept with a great weeping By sacrificing Himself, however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things Its evidences, as witnessed in all the peoples of the earth, are now manifest before thee The deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the pro-

foundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit" (Baha'u'llah 1976:85-86; 1892:93). Jesus' passion is here identified as the motive force behind Christian civilization, the unseen source of human advance. On the one hand, this passage evokes something like the Eastern Orthodox image of Jesus as the Cosmic Christ, as Pantocrator, the Ruler of All (Pelikan:57-70). On the other, Baha'u'llah as a nineteenth-century thinker innovates in linking the redemption gained by the cross to ideas such as civilization, progress, and the arts and sciences. Christ not only saved individual souls but engendered by his teachings and self-sacrifice an entire civilization.

Why does Baha'u'llah accept the crucifixion? Christian feelings about and images of the crucifixion come closer to the religious sensibilities of Shi'ites than they do to those of most Sunnis. But even most Shi'ites, despite their passion plays for Imam Husayn, rejected the idea that Christ died on the cross. A more relevant event might be the execution of the Bab. Most Muslims thought the paradigmatic prophet was Muhammad, a successful Prophet-Statesman who died of old age in the capital of the incipient state that he created, and this image may have made it difficult for them to concede that Jesus could be summarily killed. Babis, on the other hand, knew very well that a Manifestation of God could be so cruelly treated, since they daily lived with the outrage at Tabriz. Indeed, the passion of Christ helped justify the passion of the Bab.

I have found only one reference in Baha'u'llah's writings to the resurrection of Christ. In a poetic passage Baha'u'llah depicts himself as having adorned the cross in his previous manifestation as Christ, saying that he has now risen from the dead (Ishraq-Khavarī 1982:148). In short, he assimilates the resurrection to the second coming. In accord with his symbolic approach to the miracle stories in the Gospels, he apparently understood the resurrection narratives in Matthew and Luke as a spiritual event in the lives of the disciples rather than as a physical reality. This is certainly the interpretation of his son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Baha, who may well have received it from his father (1981:103-105; 1983:76-78). Baha'u'llah does refer to Christ's ascension into heaven but seems to use it as a symbolic manner of talking about his death upon the cross. In the *Book of Certitude* he says of the authorities' actions toward Jesus: "They at last heaped on His blessed Person such woes that He took His flight unto the fourth heaven" (Baha'u'llah 1970:133, 1980a:103). In Islamic lore Jesus was supposed to inhabit the fourth (sometimes the third) of the seven heavens until his return at the end of time (Robinson:94). In the

“Surah of Sultan” Baha’u’llah depicts Jesus upon the cross as severing himself from this world and “ascending” into the divine presence (Ishraq-Khavari 1967:193-194).

The difference between the major Muslim treatments of Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death and Baha’u’llah’s could not be more stark. Baha’u’llah’s Jesus equivocates in Gethsemane, boldly replies to Annas and Caiaphas, is delivered to Pilate, and is crucified to the death on Good Friday. His weary soul is raised up to God from the cross. Few Muslim accounts indeed go so far or accord so intimately with aspects of New Testament texts. Like modern Christian liberals, Baha’u’llah sees the Resurrection not as a bodily but as a spiritual event, an existential realization in the disciples.

PARACLETE AND PAROUSIA

The New Testament writers, and most Christians ever since, did not think the drama of Jesus ended with the ascension to his Father. He was expected to return. The return (Gr *parousia*) of Christ is probably the Gospel theme to which Baha’u’llah himself most frequently adverts. Since Baha’u’llah’s idea of time is the gyre, the spiral combining recurrent cycles and upward progression, Jesus’ life is unique from one point of view but subject to the Eternal Return from another. There is a sense, he argues, in which the advent of each subsequent Manifestation of God (Muhammad and the Bab) represents a “return” of Christ. Of Muhammad, he says: “In the Dispensation of the Qur’an both the Book and the Cause of Jesus were confirmed. As to the matter of names, Muhammad, Himself, declared: ‘I am Jesus.’ He recognized the truth of the signs, prophecies, and words of Jesus, and testified that they were all of God. In this sense, neither the person of Jesus nor His writings hath differed from that of Muhammad and of His holy Book, inasmuch as both have championed the Cause of God, uttered His praise, and revealed His commandments. Thus it is that Jesus, Himself, declared: ‘I go away and come again unto you’ [John 14.28]. Consider the sun. Were it to say now, ‘I am the sun of yesterday,’ it would speak the truth” (Baha’u’llah 1970 20, cf. Buck; Lawson 1987:342-343). In his *Gems of the Mysteries* Baha’u’llah quotes John 16:5-7 about the Counsellor or Comforter (Gr *paraclete*) who, Jesus promised his disciples, would come once he himself had departed (Baha’u’llah 1890-1978, 3:11-12; cf. Lambden forthcoming). These verses were very popular among Muslim apologists, who saw in them a prediction of Muhammad’s coming. On the one hand, Baha’u’llah confirmed that Jesus gave them glad tidings of a prophet who would come after him, appearing to confirm that Muhammad was the *paraclete*. On the other

hand, in Baha'u'llah's cyclical schema of the Eternal Return, the Counselor would come again and again, first as Muhammad, then as the Bab. This figure becomes another way of referring to the spiritual return of Christ (Ishraq-Khavarī 1971-73, 4.65; Lambden 1983:45-47, Buck) In the *Book of Certitude* Baha'u'llah presents a long excursus on the minor apocalypse from Mt 24 29-31, which enumerates the signs that will accompany his eschatological return, showing the symbolic ways in which the Bab's advent had fulfilled them (Baha'u'llah 1970:20-93; see Buck).

Many Muslims expected that after the advent of the Mahdī (a descendant of the Prophet who was expected to arise at the end of time to fill the world with justice after it had been filled with tyranny), Jesus would return shortly before the Resurrection Day. Muslim lore even contains numerous miraculous acts and adventures that the returned Christ will undertake (Parrinder:122-125, Robinson:78-105). Mahmoud Ayoub has translated a particularly interesting Sufi interpretation of the return of Christ, by Isma'il ibn Mustafa al-Haqqī, which says of Jesus: "He shall return in the end to be a sign for the hour (*'ilm li's-sa'ah*, that is, the Day of Resurrection [Q. 43 61]) . . . [For in this] is [the Islamic dispensation's] great ennoblement, in that it will be closed by a prophet-messenger who will be subject to the *shari'a* [divinely-revealed Law]. Both Jews and Christians will believe in it [that is, Islam]. Through him (Jesus) God will renew the age of prophethood for the community (*umma*). He shall be served by the Mahdi and the men of the cave. He shall marry and beget children. He shall be one of the community of Muhammad as the seal of his *awliya'* [saints] . . . For the Spirit of Jesus is the manifestation of the Greatest Name, and an effulgence of divine power . . ." (Haqqī in Ayoub 1980:121). In a gloss on Qur'an 2:86 the Bab says the "clear signs" God bestowed on Jesus are a reference to his future co-advent with the Islamic promised one. He identifies Jesus or the Holy Spirit that aids him as "the noblest of the partisans of [the first Shi'ite Imam or successor to the Prophet] 'Ali" (the Bab in Lawson 1987:484-485)

The Bab gradually revealed himself to be the Mahdi and prophesied the coming of "He Whom God shall make Manifest" When Baha'u'llah asserted, from 1863, that he was the promised one prophesied by the Bab, he was as a result claiming to be the spiritual return of Christ. The idea of past holy figures "returning" (*raj'at*) was a doctrine of Shi'ite Islam, not so very different in conception from Jesus' own assertion that John the Baptist had been the return of the Prophet Elijah In Baha'u'llah's Tablet to Queen Victoria, he wrote, "all that hath been mentioned in the Gospel hath been fulfilled The land of Syria hath been honoured by the footsteps of its Lord . . ." (1967:33, 1968:131). In his letter to the Pope

Baha'u'llah says that "He, verily, hath again come down from Heaven even as He came down from it the first time Beware that thou dispute not with Him even as the Pharisees disputed with Him (Jesus) without a clear token or proof" (1967:83; 1968:73). Similar statements are scattered through Baha'u'llah's writings (1988:11; 1980b:4-5; cf. Lambden 1993).

The complex figurative treatment of Jesus' return in Baha'u'llah's writings, depending as it does upon ideas such as cyclical sacred time, the return of personality-attributes, and the more mystical traditions of Islamic eschatology, has perforce been treated very briefly here. It is clear, however, that for Baha'u'llah Jesus Christ possessed an eschatological and not merely a historical significance. He is a form of the Eternal Prophet, returning again and again through the upward gyre of sacred history

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Jesus and the New Testament are important for Baha'u'llah for many reasons, some explicit and some implicit. Among the latter is the way in which references to Jesus and the Gospel helped to relativize the Islamic heritage. For a new religion to emerge from Islam, with its dense, millenium-old traditions and highly elaborated religious scholarship, was as difficult as for a moon to escape the gravity of its planet. Taking the New Testament seriously helped put Islam in perspective, as one religious civilization among many. Although the Qur'an itself depicted Muhammad as only one among the messengers of God, subsequent Muslim tradition tended to contain a fully fleshed-out image of the Prophet while reducing the previous envoys to thin stereotypes. Baha'u'llah cites and quotes the New Testament to evoke the rich texture of Jesus' life as revealed in the Gospels. The French linguist Saussure suggested the metaphor of the chessboard for some kinds of linguistic change, arguing that when one piece changes position, it completely reconfigures the board, affecting all the other pieces. I would argue that the insertion of the New Testament into Arabic and Persian discourse functions in a similar manner, causing other texts, including the Qur'an, suddenly to look very different. Baha'u'llah blends together the various sources about Jesus' life available to Muslims by accepting the authority of the existing New Testament and interpreting the other sources in light of it.

Not only does an engagement with New Testament texts allow Baha'u'llah to relativize Islam, but it also provides him with an opportunity to reach out to Christians as friends and even potential converts to his religion. Baha'u'llah's good relations with Christians in Edirne and in the Acre-Haifa area to some extent derived from his obvious openness to

and respect for the Christian scriptures, an attitude that contrasted with that of most local Muslim leaders. He especially emphasizes his assertion that he is the spiritual return of Christ in his letters to Christians (Buck unpublished; cf. Buck 1986; Momen 1992). Nevertheless, this use of the New Testament for missiological purposes post-dates Baha'u'llah's extensive citations of it to Muslim interlocutors in Baghdad, and so reaching out to Christians cannot have been his primary motivation in turning to these texts.

Baha'u'llah also refers to Jesus in order to make sense of the setbacks faced by Babis and Baha'is. Jesus' harried life of self-denial and radical itinerancy are implicitly seen as similar to the imprisonments and exiles of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. Caiaphas and Annas are gradually focused on as the chief source of opposition to Jesus and are depicted as analogous to the Muslim learned men and judges of Qajar Iran. Baha'u'llah conceived of himself as a prophet teaching wisdom, as a conduit for the irruption of divine grace and energy into the world, as a founder of a new, global civilization, and he depicted Jesus in the same terms. Jesus' Gospel was held by Christians to abrogate the complex ritual and other laws of Judaism, just as Baha'u'llah abrogated much Islamic and Babi law in favor of a simpler religion based on a few broad ethical principles. Passages such as the Minor Apocalypse could be employed to help naturalize the messianic and eschatological motifs in Iranian culture, bolstering Babi-Baha'i claims that the advent of the End-Time and of the promised one could occur in normal history as a spiritual rather than physical apocalypse. Finally, the theme of redemptive sacrifice, so powerful in Shi'ite Islam, was reinforced by the New Testament, providing a doubly strong basis upon which to understand the execution by firing squad of the Bab and the exiles, and of the imprisonment and humiliations inflicted on Baha'u'llah.

For triumphalist Muslims with the image of the conquering Muhammad in their minds, the shattered corpse on the square in Tabriz and the ignominious imprisonment of Baha'u'llah in the Ottoman barracks of Acre stood as arguments against the truth of the Babi and Baha'i religions. But these outrages were after all no more damning than the scandal of the cross, the notoriety of which had not prevented the emergence of Christianity as the world's most successful religion. Thus, Baha'u'llah strongly and explicitly affirms the historicity of the crucifixion and death of Christ, despite the overwhelming consensus against it among exegetes of the Qur'an. Baha'u'llah was clearly steeped in the esoteric Shi'ite and Sufi literature that most often, within Islamic culture, acquiesced in the historicity of Jesus' execution. Aspects of Christian theology, especially the ideas of the Logos and the divinity of Christ, resonated well with the esoteric Shi'ite and Sufi background of Baha'i theology, and if taken in a

generic sense as applicable to all the High Prophets, helped justify Babi theopathic language. In keeping with Baha'u'llah's figurative approach to Jesus' miracles, he sees even Christ's predictions of his own return or *parousia* to refer not to cosmic events but to an allegory of Eternal Return, a return of the attributes and not of the essence, so that Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah are all in some sense cyclical returns of the Christ-spirit, all equally fulfilling in a symbolic manner the dire omens of the Minor Apocalypse. The final image of Jesus in Baha'u'llah's writings is as the Prisoner of Acre in western Galilee.

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