

## The Seven Valleys of Bahá’u’lláh and Farid ud-Din Attar

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“**Y**e are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust.”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

While in Baghdad in exile, Bahá’u’lláh left the city for a period of two years (April 10, 1854 to March 19, 1856) to withdraw to the mountains of Kurdistan and the town of Sulaymaniyyih where His true identity as unknown but word of His sanctified character and mystical knowledge spread. After He returned to Baghdad, Bahá’u’lláh, who had not yet openly declared His mission, wrote a letter responding to questions posed to him by a sufi mystic, Shaykh Muhyi’d-Din, which has come to be known by the title *The Seven Valleys* (*Haft-Vadi*). This short mystical essay, written in the Persian language, traces the essence of the journey of the soul in its eternal approach towards its Creator, God. The seven stages (valleys) of this journey is a traditional Eastern mystical concept. The metaphor of the seven valleys is also found in the famous late twelfth century work of Farid ud-Din Attar, a narrative poem of more than four thousand lines, called “*The Conference of the Birds*” (*Manteq at-Tair*). *The Seven Valleys of Bahá’u’lláh* is an original commentary on that traditional mystical theme and alludes to His own impending proclamation in many subtle ways. With the threads of similarity of theme, stories, allegory, and especially bird imagery, Bahá’u’lláh weaves a new garment for the mystical path of humanity. The theme of bird imagery in both the work of Bahá’u’lláh and of Attar is the topic for this paper.

### Imagery of the Bird—Sufism and Attar’s poem

*The Conference of the Birds* is the best known work of the mystical Persian poet, Farid ud-Din Attar, who was born in mid-twelfth century A.D. in north-east Iran (where Omar Khayyam also was born). His name, Attar, indicates a perfume seller or druggist/doctor which may have been his occupation as well as poet. He traveled widely, much as his counterparts in medieval Europe, the troubadours and wandering scholars. After his wanderings, he settled in his hometown of Nishapur although there is some evidence that later he was tried for heresy. He was banished and his property looted. However, at the time of his death he was back in Nishapur where he is buried.

Attar’s “*The Conference of the Birds*” is a poem about sufism, a doctrine of the mystics of Islam. Sufis were continually under threat of being accused of being heretics (by orthodox Islam) because their teachings were handed down from shaykh (spiritual leader) to pupil and they were forbidden to reveal their most important beliefs, although different sufis living at different times have clearly believed in different things.

Sufi doctrines include: only one God exists, all other things are an emanation of Him, or are His ‘shadow’; religion is useful mainly as a way of reaching to a Truth beyond the teachings of particular religions—however Islam is the most useful religion; man’s distinctions between good and evil have no meaning for God who knows only unity; the soul is trapped within the cage of the body but can, by looking inward, recognize its essential affinity with God; the awakened soul, guided by God’s grace, can

progress along a 'Way' which leads to annihilation in God. The doctrine received its most extreme expression in the writings of the Spanish Arab pantheist Ibn Arabi, a contemporary of Attar, who maintained that the being of creation and the Creator are indivisible. In "The Conference of the Birds," Attar frequently seems to be about to propound the same doctrine, only to step back at the last moment and maintain a final distinction between God and His creatures.<sup>2</sup>

Sufism was not simply a doctrine but was a discipline for living where its practitioners followed a carefully prescribed 'Way.' Attar's poem, "The Conference of the Birds," is a description of the stages encountered by the adepts of the sufis' Way in the form of an allegory of the "birds" of the world gathered together to seek their "king" (God). In their quest, the birds are led by one of them called the hoopoe bird (*hod-hod*, in Persian) who acts as their shaykh (spiritual guide) on their journey through the seven valleys: quest, love, insight into mystery, detachment, unity, bewilderment, and poverty/nothingness. The purpose of the discipline is to achieve purification.<sup>3</sup>

Although the stories are told by the hoopoe to birds they are in reality told by Attar to humanity. The hoopoe tells the birds that they indeed have their own king—called the Simorgh—but that he lives far away. The birds are at first enthusiastic to begin their search, but when they realize how difficult the journey will be they start to make excuses. The nightingale, for example, cannot leave his beloved; the hawk is satisfied with his position at court waiting on earthly kings; the finch is too afraid even to set out. The hoopoe counters each of their excuses with stories and anecdotes which show how their desires and fears are mistaken and gives advice for living. The birds fly a little way and then pause to ask the hoopoe about the length of the journey. In answer the hoopoe describes the seven valleys of the Way. The journey is quickly dealt with and, out of the thousands of birds who began the journey, only thirty birds have made it to the end where they arrive at the court of the Simorgh. At first they are turned back then, after each bird is asked to review its own misdeeds in life, with their spirits now refined, the birds are finally admitted and find that the Simorgh they have sought is none other than themselves reflected in the "face" of the Simorgh. The story depends on a pun in which the words in Persian *si* (30) and *morgh* (birds) remain at the end of the journey, and the *si morph* (30 birds) meet the Simorgh, the goal of their quest. Two sufi themes are diffused throughout the poem: the necessity for destroying the Self, and the importance of passionate love. The two are connected: the Self is seen as an entity dependent on pride and reputation; there can be no progress until the bird (pilgrim) is indifferent to both, and the commonest way of making him indifferent is the experience of overwhelming love.<sup>4</sup>

The hoopoe says to the birds:

I know our king—but how can I alone  
Endure the journey to His distant throne?  
Join me, and when at last we end our quest  
Our king will greet you as His honoured guest.  
How long will you persist in blasphemy?  
Escape your self-hood's vicious tyranny—  
Whoever can evade the Self transcends  
This world and as a lover he ascends.  
Set free your soul; impatient of delay,  
Step out along our sovereign's royal Way:  
We have a king; beyond Kaf's mountain peak  
The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,  
And He is always near to us, though we  
Live far from His transcendent majesty.  
A hundred thousand veils of dark and light  
Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,  
And in both worlds no being shares the throne  
That marks the Simorgh's power and His alone—  
He reigns in undisturbed omnipotence,  
Bathed in the light of His magnificence—

No mind, no intellect can penetrate  
The mystery of His unending state . . .<sup>5</sup>  
And near the end of the poem Attar says:  
You cannot hope for Life till you progress  
Through some small shadow of this Nothingness.  
First He will humble you in dust and mire,  
And then bestow the glory you desire.  
Be nothing first! And then you will exist,  
You cannot live whilst life and Self persist—  
Till you reach Nothingness you cannot see  
The Life you long for in eternity.<sup>6</sup>

### Imagery of the Bird—Bahá’í sources

One of the Apostles of Bahá’u’lláh, the famous calligrapher, Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-Isfahani (died in ‘Akká, 1912 AD) entitled *Mishkin-Qalam* (Musk-scented Pen), who is perhaps most well known as the designer of the “Greatest Name” symbol, was the first Bahá’í artist to use the Islamic cultural art of calligraphy and painting to express his Bahá’í religious and mystical feelings. Bird imagery, which appears so often in his calligraphic renderings, is a powerful expression of the theme of the “Nightingale of Paradise” announcing the bringing of the heavenly message of a new Faith to our earthly home. Numerous examples of his outstanding work are preserved in museums (including the Sackler Museum at Harvard University) and Bahá’í centers around the world.<sup>7</sup>

The Central Figures of the Bahá’í Faith have used the image of the bird to convey numerous spiritual conditions and states of being, drawing on a rich cultural heritage to express more vividly their message. A list of examples include:

#### From Bahá’u’lláh:

bird of utterance (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*); bird of the human heart, bird of the Throne, bird of the spirit, the bird which soareth (*Gleanings*); bird of Desire, bird of Eternity, bird of Heaven, bird of the human mind, mystic bird (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*); bird of thy soul, Persian bird, bird of the heavens of God, this mortal Bird (*Seven Valleys*); and celestial bird, broken bird (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*).

#### From ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

broken-winged bird, bird of love and understanding (*Bahá’í Prayers*); divine bird, roving bird, bird of high flight (*Japan Will Turn Ablaze*); bird of joy, kingly bird (*Memorials of the Faithful*); wealth of a bird (*Some Answered Questions*); and bird of my mind, bird of clay, bird of faithfulness, soaring bird (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*).

#### From Shoghi Effendi:

the bird of human kind (*God Passes By*).

### Bahá’u’lláh’s Uses of Bird Imagery in The Seven Valleys

In the letter’s preamble, Bahá’u’lláh addresses Shaykh Muhyi’-Din with these loving words:

“Further, we have harkened to what the nightingale of knowledge sang on the boughs of the tree of thy being, and learned what the dove of certitude cried on the branches of the bower of thy heart.”<sup>8</sup>

“...and the bird of thy soul shall recall the holy sanctuaries of preexistence and soar on the wings of longing...”<sup>9</sup>

And in the form of a postscript at the end of His letter, Bahá’u’lláh answers a question from the Shaykh which may have been about one of the famous birds from Attar’s Conference of the Birds. Bahá’u’lláh writes:

## Lights of 'Irfán

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“The thoughts thou has expressed as to the interpretation of the common species of bird that is called in Persian Gunjishk (sparrow) were considered. Thou appearest to be well-grounded in mystic truth. However, on every plane, to every letter a meaning is allotted which relateth to that plane. Indeed, the wayfarer findeth a secret in every name, a mystery in every letter. In one sense, these letters refer to holiness.”<sup>10</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's advice to the Shaykh challenge his spirit and questing soul with these words:

“Wert thou to harken to the melodies of this mortal Bird [Bahá'u'lláh], then wouldst thou seek out the undying chalice and pass by every perishable cup.”<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual journey which Bahá'u'lláh describes passes through the seven valleys of search, love, knowledge, unity, contentment, wonderment and poverty/absolute nothingness.

To be able to pass through the second valley (love), Bahá'u'lláh writes:

“And, if confirmed by the Creator, the lover escapes from the claws of the eagle of love...”<sup>12</sup>

To leave the third valley (knowledge), Bahá'u'lláh writes:

“If thou be a man of communion and prayer, soar up on the wings of assistance from Holy Souls, that thou mayest behold the mysteries of the Friend and attain to the lights of the Beloved.”<sup>13</sup>

In the middle of the fourth valley (unity), Bahá'u'lláh refers to His own precarious condition, saying:

“And if a nightingale soar upward from the clay of self and dwell in the rose bower of the heart, and in Arabian melodies and sweet Iranian songs recount the mysteries of God—a single word of which quickeneth to fresh, new life the bodies of the dead, and bestoweth the Holy Spirit upon the moldering bones of this existence—thou wilt behold a thousand claws of envy, a myriad beaks of rancor hunting after Him and with all their power intent upon His death.”<sup>14</sup>

“Thus it hath been made clear that these stages depend on the vision of the wayfarer. In every city he will behold a world, in every Valley reach a spring, in every meadow hear a song. But the falcon of the mystic heaven hath many a wondrous carol of the spirit in His breast, and the Persian bird keepeth in His soul many a sweet Arab melody; yet these are hidden, and hidden shall remain.”<sup>15</sup>

In the fifth valley (contentment), Bahá'u'lláh writes:

“The tongue faileth in describing these three Valleys, and speech falleth short. The pen steppeth not into this region, the ink leaveth only a blot. In these planes, the nightingale of the heart hath other songs and secrets, which make the heart to stir and the soul to clamor, but this mystery of inner meaning may be whispered only from heart to heart, confided only from breast to breast.”<sup>16</sup>

And in the seventh valley (true poverty and absolute nothingness), Bahá'u'lláh concludes:

“Then, ere the nightingale of the mystic paradise repair to the garden of God, and the rays of the heavenly morning return to the Sun of Truth—make thou an effort, that haply that in this dust-heap of the mortal world thou mayest catch a fragrance from the everlasting garden, and live forever in the shadow of the peoples of this city. And when thou hast attained this highest station and come to this mightiest plane, then shalt thou gaze on the Beloved, and forget all else.”<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

Bahá'u'lláh, in most of his writings, says that all we can “know” of the unknowable essence of God is what we understand through belief and worship of His Manifestation(s). There is a clear distinction between the three realms of the Creator, the Manifestations of God, and the creation. The closest we can come to God is living a life in God, “that every man may testify, in himself, by himself, in the station of the Manifestation of his Lord, that verily there is no God save Him, and that every man may thereby win his way to the summit of realities, until none shall contemplate anything whatsoever but that he shall see God therein.”<sup>18</sup> The hoopoe bird in Attar's poem which acts as a spiritual guide (shaykh) to the world of birds on their quest to reach their king, Simorgh, is not the same as a Manifestation of God, but his words of wisdom shed light on the journey's Way.

In The Seven Valleys Bahá’u’lláh, speaking of His own Station as a Manifestation of God, warns:

“O My friend! Many a hound pursueth this gazelle of the desert of oneness; many a talon claweth at this thrush of the eternal garden. Pitiless ravens do lie in wait for this bird of the heavens of God, and the huntsman of envy stalketh this deer of the meadow of love...”

“[t]hey who soar in the heaven of singleness and reach to the sea of the Absolute, reckon this city—which is the station of life in God—as the furthestmost state of mystic knowers, and the farthest homeland of the lovers.”<sup>19</sup>

After bringing the “severed wayfarer” through the seven valleys, Bahá’u’lláh reveals that “to this evanescent One of the mystic ocean, this station is the first gate of the heart’s citadel, that is, man’s first entrance to the city of the heart” of which He cannot speak unless a “kindred soul” can be found.<sup>20</sup>

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### Notes

- 1) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, 327.
- 2) Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 11-12.
- 3) *ibid.*, 14.
- 4) *ibid.*, 15-19.
- 5) *ibid.*, 33-34.
- 6) *ibid.*, 221-222.
- 7) *Mishkin-Qalam: XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*, Society for Persian Letters & Arts, Landegg Academy, Switzerland, 1992.
- 8) Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, 1991 edition, 2.
- 9) *ibid.*, 3.
- 10) *ibid.*, 42.
- 11) *ibid.*, 43.
- 12) *ibid.*, 11.
- 13) *ibid.*, 17.
- 14) *ibid.*, 20.
- 15) *ibid.*, 28-29.
- 16) *ibid.*, 30.
- 17) *ibid.*, 38.
- 18) *ibid.*, 1-2.
- 19) *ibid.*, 41.
- 20) *ibid.*, 41.

