

The Greenland Promise

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After moving to Canada in October of 1951, I was told by Canadian Baha'is that 'Abdu'l-Baha had promised that Greenland would one day become green again. It was a startling prophecy. The topic of a future greening of Greenland was never mentioned by my Danish friends whose country then administered Greenland before home rule was established in 1979.

One reason for this was that the promise may have been gleaned from 'Abdu'l-Baha's Tablet to the Baha'is of Canada and Greenland, a text few European Baha'is had studied. The prophecy was repeated often. Outside observers saw it as an example where religious belief did not appear to correspond with science, while some Baha'is saw it as a promise that an all-powerful God can and will improve the earthly conditions of a more spiritual humanity.

The statement that "Greenland will become green again" did not just promise a green future, but it also implied that Greenland was green in the past to become green "again". If this was true, a future prospect of an ice free land would be credible. There is no reason why any place on earth cannot return to a former condition. Arable land has turned into desert and deserts sometimes became arable again.

The problem with Greenland is that it never was ice free ever since man has walked on earth and a meltdown of Greenland's ice sheet would scarcely be a blessing, but would, certainly in the short term, bring more harm than good to human society. The good news, as we shall see, is that 'Abdu'l-Baha's promise in His Tablet of the Divine Plan does not at all disagree with science, because He never claimed that Greenland was once an ice free paradise and He did not promise that it would become one in a geological sense.

In the English language library of Baha'i texts a search under the category of authoritative scripture shows 20 mentions of "Greenland" in 70 different documents. The first and most

important mention to which several others refer later is this one by 'Abdu'l-Baha:

TABLET TO THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF CANADA AND GREENLAND Written on April 5, 1916, in the garden adjacent to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, and addressed to the Bahá'ís of Canada -- Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon, Mackenzie, Keewatin, Ungava, Franklin Islands and Greenland.

“He is God! O ye daughters and sons of the Kingdom: ALTHOUGH in most of the states and cities of the United States, praise be to God, His fragrances are diffused, and souls unnumbered are turning their faces and advancing toward the Kingdom of God, yet in some of the states the Standard of Unity is not yet upraised as it should be, nor are the mysteries of the Holy Books, such as the Bible, the Gospel, and the Qur’án, unravelled. Through the concerted efforts of all the friends the Standard of Unity must needs be unfurled in those states, and the divine teachings promoted, so that these states may also receive their portion of the heavenly bestowals and a share of the Most Great Guidance. Likewise in the provinces of Canada, such as Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Ungava, Keewatin, Mackenzie, Yukon, and the Franklin Islands in the Arctic Circle -- the believers of God must become self-sacrificing and like unto the candles of guidance become ignited in the provinces of Canada. Should they show forth such a magnanimity, it is assured that they will obtain universal divine confirmations, the heavenly cohorts will reinforce them uninterruptedly, and a most great victory will be obtained. God willing, the call of the Kingdom may reach the ears of the Eskimos, the inhabitants of the Islands of Franklin in the north of Canada, as well as Greenland. Should the fire of the love of God be kindled in Greenland, all the ice of that country will be melted, and its cold

weather become temperate -- that is, if the hearts be touched with the heat of the love of God, that territory will become a divine rose garden and a heavenly paradise, and the souls, even as fruitful trees, will acquire the utmost freshness and beauty. Effort, the utmost effort, is required. Should you display an effort, so that the fragrances of God may be diffused among the Eskimos, its effect will be very great and far-reaching. God says in the great Qur'án: A day will come wherein the lights of unity will enlighten all the world. "The earth will be irradiated with the light of its Lord." [Qur'án 39:69.] In other words, the earth will become illumined with the light of God. That light is the light of unity. "There is no God but God." The continent and the islands of Eskimos are also parts of this earth. They must similarly receive a portion of the bestowals of the Most Great Guidance. Upon you be greeting and praise! (Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of the Divine Plan, p. 25)

Since all but one of these references to Greenland are linked directly to Canada's importance in the unfolding world order of Baha'u'llah, it does not surprise that in other countries little if any mention was made of a promise that dealt with Greenland's future. There is, however, one additional reference to Greenland dating back to 1996 when the Universal House of Justice made mention of it in its message at Ridvan 153 B.E : "Our thoughts turn often to the Bahá'í community of Greenland, whose staunchness of faith and dogged perseverance have won our admiration and praise, and have resulted in the Faith's becoming firmly established in that distant land. Inspired by the promise set out in the Tablets of the Divine Plan that "if the hearts be touched with the heat of the love of God, that territory will become a divine rose-garden and a heavenly paradise, and the souls, even as fruitful trees, will acquire the utmost freshness and beauty," let them now go forth to claim new victories on the home front and to transform their nation through the power of the Divine Teaching."

Here the House of Justice is quoting ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s amplification of His message. This amplification seems important. It shifts emphasis from a dramatic earthly vision of a land freed from its icy burden and explains the deeper meaning of the Master’s promise to Greenlanders. In the middle of the Tablet of the Divine Plan addressed to Canada and the northern regions of the western hemisphere, ‘Abdu’lBaha first writes, *“Should the fire of the love of God be kindled in Greenland, all the ice of that country will be melted, and its cold weather become temperate —”* It should be noted that the sentence does not end here with a full stop which would have made this statement quite unequivocal indeed. Instead, the sentence continues after two dashes and a comma with a *“that is”* and gives this amplification, or explanation, *“ — that is, if the hearts be touched with the heat of the love of God, that territory will become a divine rose-garden and a heavenly paradise, and the souls, even as fruitful trees, will acquire the utmost freshness and beauty.”* It is this latter portion of the sentence that the House of Justice chose to quote. Here ‘Abdu’l-Baha places His emphasis on the heat of the love of God, rather than on a more benign earthly climate, and on *“souls, even as fruitful trees,”* rather than on lush earthly vegetation.

It may well benefit the promotion of the Cause of God to meditate on this message instead of letting fervor repeat exaggerated and unfounded claims which could be exploited by ill-wishers to discredit the validity of the Teachings as a whole. In this regard this further explanation by ‘Abdu’lBaha should be instructive:

[Someone] asked why the teachings of all religions are expressed largely by parables and metaphors and not in the plain language of the people. 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied: *"Divine things are too deep to be expressed by common words. The heavenly teachings are expressed in parable in order to be understood and preserved for ages to come. When the spiritually minded dive deeply into the ocean of their meaning they bring to the surface the pearls of their inner significance. There is no greater pleasure than to study God's Word*

with a spiritual mind." - Abdu'l-Baha in London, p. 79. And elsewhere He has said, "*Consider how the parable makes attainment dependent upon capacity.*" - Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 149

'Abdu'l-Baha's linkage between human response to God's Commandments and the earthly environment is mentioned in other religions. Buddhist texts also link nature's equilibrium to human behaviour. "When people are happy and satisfied...when good deeds are promoted and virtues are increased...then everyone prospers...the weather and temperature become normal, sun, moon and stars shine naturally; rains and winds come timely; and all natural calamities disappear. - The Teaching of Buddha, p.233, Bukko Dendo Kyokai

A valid question then is why is glacier-covered Greenland known as green land when it has been anything but green. Norse legends from the 12th century tell of Eric the Red exploring the southeast and southwest coasts of Greenland from 983 to 986 A.D. Towards the West, islands were teeming with birds and the sea ran plentiful with fish. Everywhere the coastlines had many fjords that afforded safe moorage. At the head of these fjords stretched enormous grassy meadows and there grew willows, juniper, birch, and wild berries. After arduous voyage in an open Viking ship, arriving from an austere region in Northern Europe, this greenery must have made an overwhelming impression to fully justify Greenland's name. Moreover, only a few years earlier in 976 A.D. Iceland, the British Isles and Northern Europe had experienced a catastrophic famine and people there were starved for food and always on the lookout for new arable land. They would have been more inclined to settle in a green land than at some other inhospitable place.

Suzanne Schuurmann, a Canadian Baha'i, who with her husband Hubert and their three children lived in Greenland for a year, has added here her own observations: "What no one ever writes about, maybe because they have not actually been in Greenland, is that

the southern tip, where the first Norsemen most likely landed, is in fact very green with rolling meadows. When we were there sheep were raised and some very decent gardens were grown with veg and flowers. There are no trees, mind you, save for some that looked like scrawny versions of lilacs, but were I think poplars. Even a day's sailing north on the western shore sheep raising is practiced to this day using the old Norse stone walls to delineate the fields. After Iceland where the Norsemen had a foothold, the southern part of Greenland may have looked green and inviting, especially since at that time they were experiencing a warming (for a time)."

Core drillings of Greenland's ice have confirmed that in the 10th century Greenland underwent a warm spell. However, the bulk of this newly discovered "mini continent", in fact 80% of it, lay buried under a vast sheet of ice which on average was 2,000 meters, and in some places 3,000 meters thick. This enormous thickness can perhaps be best appreciated by comparing it with Capetown's Table Mountain that rises a mere 1,100 meters, or Vancouver's Grouse Mountain that towers just 1,200 meters above the shoreline below. Core drillings and other tests indicate that Greenland's vast ice sheet formed over two million years ago. It covers 1,800,000 square kilometers at an average thickness of 2,135 meters.

Some scientists believe that global warming may be about to push the ice sheet over a threshold where it could melt within a few hundred years. If the entire 2,850,000 cubic kilometers of ancient ice were to melt it would raise the world's oceans by over seven meters. This would inundate many coastal cities and low lying regions on all continents and drown several island nations such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Maldives which have elevations of less than seven meters above sea level.

The Greenland Ice Sheet is sometimes referred to as inland ice, or its Danish equivalent indlandsis. The currently existing ice is estimated to be only some 110,000 years old because of a regular

“calving” of icebergs into the ocean and a new precipitation of snow. However, it is generally accepted by science that the ice sheet formed fairly rapidly in the late Pliocene or early Pleistocene period when ice caps and glaciers coalesced. The massive weight of the ice has depressed Greenland’s center deep into earth’s soft magma. As a result, the surface of Greenland’s bedrock is believed to lie near sea level. Greenland’s periphery is ringed by mountain ranges. Some of us who have travelled on transatlantic flights may have observed the jagged peaks protruding from the ice. These mountains confine the ice sheet along its margins. If this ice were to disappear altogether, Greenland would initially look like a semi-circular mountainous archipelago with a vast lagoon of ocean water at its center.

This somewhat unattractive prospect could change over extremely long periods when a “post-glacial rebound” may cause Greenland’s tectonic base to rise up from the magma and to form a contiguous continent. Many thousands of years later, following the dictates of life, this newly formed continent may even become covered with forests and lush vegetation. Northern Europe serves as an example. After it was liberated from the enormous weight of the ice shield at the end of the last Ice Age, parts of northern Europe began to rise from Earth’s interior mantle. While this movement has slowed considerably, it actually continues to push up the whole region by roughly one centimeter per annum. Geologists expect this slow movement to continue over the next 10,000 years at which time some regions of northern Europe may be 100 meters higher above sea level than they are today. One can therefore speculate that Greenland could experience a similar change, but initially there would be many imponderable consequences for our planet’s climate and for human existence.

The melt of Greenland’s three million cubic kilometers of ice would change the salinity of earth’s oceans which in turn would influence marine life and ocean currents. It could also impact Antarctica’s ice

sheet of 30 million cubic kilometers which represents no less than 60 per cent of our planet's entire fresh water supply. Should Antarctica get "infected" by a Greenland meltdown, the world's oceans would rise by an estimated further seventy meters. It is impossible in this brief article to describe the calamitous ramifications this would have. Many coastlines would be left barely recognizable. Much of Northern Europe, Russia, North and South America, Northern India and Bangladesh would all be under water. Vast food growing regions would simply disappear. Our world as we know it would be gone. On your computer search for 'Google Maps Find Altitude' and discover the precariously low elevations of many of the world's cities and regions.

As is, land-born life has been a miraculous exception right from the beginning. The earth is essentially a water planet. Its oceans cover two-thirds of its surface and they are on average two miles (3,200 meters or 10,000 feet) deep. This is five times the average elevation of the continents which cover only one third of earth's surface. These lopsided ratios tell us that earth's water volume is ten times greater than the "volume" of our planet's protruding dry land. In many regions land rises only a few meters above sea level. The only thing that gave our race the advantage of a land-borne existence which allows us to see the Sun and the stars and to become aware of God's great universe, was the unusual formation of huge hollows and canyons within earth's crust that became the vast ocean basins. Had it not been for their fortuitous formation, the entire globe would have been covered with oceans thousands of meters deep, leaving no possibility for land-borne life.

Now that we have developed into an inter-connected world community, immature and flawed as it still may be, we have multiplied and settled wherever land offered itself for human habitation. A drastic meltdown of Greenland and other arctic and ant-arctic regions would not at all help to make our planet a happier home, but it would make our task of building an ordered

and peaceful world that much more difficult. A literal fulfillment of any perceived golden promise would in the end stop the march of civilization dead in its tracks.

These observations carry no authority whatsoever. They are meant to stimulate thought and not debate. *“He who thinks about his faith and comes to the wrong conclusion deserves a reward. He who thinks about his faith and arrives at the truth deserves a double reward.”* - Ascribed to Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) Islamic theologian, jurist, philosopher, cosmologist, psychologist and mystic

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