

Historical Facts or Spiritual Lessons

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In the Bahá'í Writings, there are many references to figures and stories from biblical scripture. Read with a literal eye, one might assume that all of these references confirm the historical authenticity of the characters and events mentioned.

However, one might ask this question: Are these stories facts or myths?

The aim of this short presentation is to find a satisfactory answer or answers based on the Bahá'í Writings.

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání, a renowned scholar of the Bahá'í Faith, in the collection of his works entitled *Miracles and Metaphors*, states:

“It is clear that the prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and to bring the people nearer to their Source and ultimate Goal. They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers, or natural scientists. Their position in the world of creation is like that of the heart in the body: it has a universal position with a general effect. The position of the learned in the world of earthly dominion is like that of a specific organ. That is, they have a particular position and a special effect. Therefore, the prophets have indulged the people in regard to their historical notions, folk stories, and scientific principles, and have spoken to them according to these. They conversed as was appropriate to their audience and hid certain realities behind the curtain of allusion. . . . Finally, it is well known that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs but addressed them according to their local traditions.”

In a discourse of Bahá'u'lláh on the Báb's commentary on the Surih of Joseph, He states:

“It is known to thee that the commentary on the Surih of Joseph hath been revealed according to the prevailing understanding of the people of that time. This hath been due to pure bounty haply the wayward and ignorant people may become transported to the realm of knowledge; because much of that which hath been stated therein are the material known to be truth with the people of Qur'án. Had it been revealed according to that which God desired, no one would have accepted and remained loyal.”

(Ayát-i-Iláhi, vol. 2, 68)

Lets see what 'Abdu'l-Bahá sates about the story of the people of the Cave (this is a miracle story of seven Christian, who were pressed to recant their Faith under threat of death by the Roman Empire, withdrew to a cave outside of Ephesus to pray. There they fell asleep and Three-hundred years later, a farmer opened the sealed cave, and the seven sleepers awoke to find that Christianity was not only the accepted religion of Ephesus but the state religion of the entire Roman Empire.)

“In the days of the Prophet, the Jews prompted the Quraysh to ask about the People of the Cave. When the question was asked, his holiness said: "I will inform you tomorrow." By one account, it was forty days (before he answered), and another account says it was at least three days. Because the Prophet knew that this was just a myth (afsanih), he was not inclined to give an answer, nor did he wish to say outright it is a myth, nor did he want to say something that is not real (haqiqat). When he saw that the enemies would not stay their hand, he answered them as though it were real. When certain matters are actually myths, the Divine Manifestations bring them out as though they were real and elucidate them. For if they were to deny well-known and established matters, others would consider this evidence of their ignorance. Therefore they elucidate them as though they were real.”

(Amr va Khalq 2:211, provisional translation by William F. McCants)

We all know about the story of the Noah's Ark. Lets examine what Bahá'u'lláh and the Universal House of Justice say about this story. Bahá'u'lláh says:

"Noah's flood is but the measure of the tears I have shed, and Abraham's fire an ebullition of My soul. Jacob's grief is but a reflection of My sorrows, and Job's afflictions a fraction of My calamity."

(Baha'u'llah, Gems of Divine Mysteries, p. 60)

The Universal House of Justice states:

“ARK -- The word "ark" means, literally, a boat or ship, something that affords protection and safety, or a chest or box. It is used in two senses in the Bible. In the first sense it refers to the Ark of Noah, which He was bidden to build of gopher wood to preserve life during the Flood. In the second sense it refers to the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred chest representing to the Hebrews God's presence among them. It was constructed to hold the Tablets of the Law in Moses' time and was later placed in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Ark, as a symbol of God's Law and the Divine Covenant that is the salvation of the people in every age and Dispensation, appears in various ways in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh refers to His faithful followers as "the denizens of the Crimson Ark"; He refers to the Ark of the Cause and also to the Ark of His Laws. A well-known passage in which this term is used appears in the Tablet of Carmel: "Ere long will God sail His Ark upon thee, and will manifest the people of Baha who have been mentioned in the Book of Names." Shoghi Effendi explains that the Ark in this passage refers to the Bahá'í Administrative Centre on Mount Carmel and that the dwellers of the Ark are the members of the Universal House of Justice.”

(The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 732)

Adib Taherzadeh in his book “The Revelation of Baha'u'llah states:

“The stories of Hud and Salih are somewhat similar to the story of Noah, the flood and the Ark. They are all symbolic. In the Bahá'í Writings we find explained the significance of such terms as Noah's Ark, the flood, the she-camel and other incidents. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a Tablet explains that the she-camel was symbolic of the holy spirit of Salih, and the milk was symbolic of the spiritual food which his spirit offered to the people..”

(Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Baha'u'llah v 4, p. 427)

“The reality of Christ was always in heaven and will always be. This is the intention of the text of the Gospel. For while Jesus Christ walked upon the earth, He said, "The Son of Man is in heaven." Therefore, holding to literal interpretation and visible fulfillment of the text of the Holy Books is simply imitation of ancestral forms and beliefs; for when we perceive the reality of Christ, these texts and statements become clear and perfectly reconcilable with each other. Unless we perceive reality, we cannot understand the meanings of the Holy Books, for these meanings are symbolical and spiritual -- such as, for instance, the raising of Lazarus, which has spiritual interpretation. We must first establish the fact that the power of God is infinite, unlimited, and that it is within that power to accomplish anything.”

(Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 245)

At this point it is noteworthy to see the answer given by the beloved Guardian's secretary on his behalf to a question about the “fourth heaven” mentioned in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. The translation of the passage is as follows:

“As to the ascent of Christ to the ‘fourth heaven’ as revealed in the glorious Book of Íqán, he (the Guardian) stated that the ‘fourth heaven’ is a term used and a belief held by the early astronomers. The followers of the Shi’ah sect likewise held this belief. As the Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed for the guidance of that sect, this term was used in conformity with the concepts of its followers.”

[Memorandum of the Research Dept. at the Bahá’í World Center written at the instruction of the House of Justice, dated 22 Oct. 1995 (“Socrates Memorandum”).]

In conclusion, whenever the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith refer to ancient traditions the story cited is worthy material for a spiritual lesson.