

# Valleys: real, symbolic and holy sites (Their representation in Bahá'í and other religious writings) \*

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*Wanderers in that happy valley  
Through two luminous windows saw  
Spirits moving musically  
To a lute's well-tuned law,  
Round about a throne, where sitting  
(Porphyrogenet!)  
In state his glory well befitting,  
The ruler of the realm was seen.*

Edgar Allan Poe, *In the Greenest of our Valleys*

## ***Introduction***

In literature, whether religious or secular, valleys and other natural phenomena, such as clouds, rain, oceans, rivers and so on, are used metaphorically. Valleys are topographical formations that are connected naturally with mountains. Valleys can only exist in mountainous territory. Thus, for instance, it would be difficult to communicate the idea of a valley to a Dutchman who has never left Holland. It is understandable, therefore, that we find references to valleys in literary creations and holy writings that were produced in mountainous countries and hilly regions. The Bible, born in the hilly regions of the Holy Land - in Judea, Samaria, and even other regions of the Middle East (see Ezekiel 37) is full of references to valleys as is the Qur'ān and *hadīth*, the Islamic tradition, which refers to the mountains of Arabia, in particular to the Hijāz, the region of Mecca and Medina in western Arabia. It is not surprising to find the same references to valleys in many of the writings in Greece, India and Iran as well as other places in the East. In this discussion we shall remain in the Middle East especially in the territories which influenced the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In all of these writings, references to valleys are to the real physical feature of the gap between mountains even when the valley is used metaphorically. Thus, when the mystic seeker moves from valley to valley, and in each he undergoes a spiritual experience, it is still seen as a moving from one real valley to the other. This movement is a progressive movement which involves great effort, because in order to reach the valley one has to cross a mountain or a chain of mountains. The valley, which the traveller reaches, represents the temporary end of a tiring effort, a station of physical rest and tranquility before the beginning of the subsequent effort to reach the next station on his path of progress. The valley is the

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place where, under the shadows of the mountains around him or maybe on the bank of a river flowing through the valley, he can rest before commencing, once again, his journey to the following station, the following valley that will bring him nearer to the last valley, the final station of his voyage. This is how the journey was seen by Bahá'u'lláh who transformed the physical journey from valley to valley into a spiritual progress. One must keep in mind that, as with any metaphor, the *real entity* stands before the writer.

Unlike Bahá'u'lláh, who transformed seven valleys and four valleys into mystical sites in the journey of the soul very much in accordance with the Sūfī tradition, in the other three religions we find a variety of attitudes to valleys, from a description of the physical topographical features to complete metaphors. Whereas in the Greek religion, valleys were always concrete sites in which certain events concerning both gods and humans were involved, a fact that turned the valley into a holy site or at least into a place where holy institutions were erected.

In this paper, the representations of valleys in their various appearances in the religious context will be presented and analysed.

### ***The reality of valleys***

It should be emphasized that the word valley (*wādī* in Arabic) appears a few times in the Qur'ān and figures abundantly in Islamic tradition, on the whole, only as a physical feature, sometimes as a real place on the map, so to speak, and sometimes as an imaginary site of some event mentioned by Muḥammad in order to deliver a moral message. This is also the manner in which the term appears in the Bible but with much more emphasis on symbolic and mystical usages.

As far as Bahá'u'lláh was concerned, he was always an integral part of the mountainous landscape of his youth in the district of Nūr of Mazandarān to the south of the Caspian Sea to which the following quotation from the writings of 'Abd al-Bahá' testifies:

ای هموطن عبدالبهاء هرچند مولد در طهران و سینین متوالیات آواره عراق و مدّتی سُرگون بلاد رومیلی و چهل سال  
محبوس عکا با وجود این وطن مازندران است یعنی میان رود بلوک نور لهذا تو را هموطن خطاب نمایم...

"O thou compatriot of 'Abdu'l-Bahá! Although my birthplace is Tehran and I was an exile for continuous years in Iraq, banished for some time to the land of Rumelia, and imprisoned for forty years in 'Akka, nevertheless my native country is Mazandarān, that is to say, in the environs of Miyānrūd in the district of Nūr. For this reason I address thee as compatriot." (*Muntakhabāt-i az Makatib-i Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā*, vol. 5, no. 1)

Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to himself in this passage, his statement is valid for his father even more, since he remembered the landscape of Mazandarān as a small child whereas Bahá'u'lláh lived in it as a young man.

### **Biblical references to valleys compared**

The Hebrew uses a few words to denote a valley or a cleft between mountains. Each word refers to the shape of this cleft, to its depth, width and so on. The Biblical person was very aware of the landscapes around him and the Biblical reference to this landscape is clear. On the whole, there is hardly any figurative reference in the Bible to valleys. Usually a valley, denoted by the words עמק or גיא, which enables passage from one side to the other and enough space for gathering, is in the Biblical narrative a site in which an event took place (such as the fight between David and Goliath in the Valley of Elah. I Samuel, 17). Since most of the valleys in the Bible were real localities they are mentioned by name. Thus, in the vicinity of Jerusalem, the Valley of Jehoshaphat between Mount Moriah and the Mount of Olives is frequently mentioned. In this particular case the name of the valley also indicated its function in the divine order: Yeho-Shaphat in Hebrew means God judged! Whether the name existed first or it followed the idea that this was the valley where God's final judgment would take place, is immaterial. But what is significant is the fact that following the ancient Biblical tradition, both Christianity and Islam identified their sites of the final judgment in the same place. To make sure that the message was well understood the prophet Joel, referring to the great event of the last judgment as the Day of the Lord, gives a vivid description of what will happen on that day.

וְקִבְצָתִי אֶת כָל הַגּוֹיִם וְהַרְקָתִים אֶל עֵמֶק יְהוֹשָׁפָט וְנִשְׁפְּתָחֵת עַמּוֹ שֶׁל עַמִּי וְנִנְחַלְתִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר פָּזְרוּ בָּגּוֹיִם וְאֶת  
אָרֶץ חַלְקוֹ.

I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat and will judge them there for my people and for my heritage. Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations and parted my land.(Joel, 3:2)

After nine verses of a long description of the evils committed by the nations, the prophet continues:

Let the nations be wakened and come to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there will I sit to judge all the nations round about. (Joel 3:12)

At this point the prophet decides to change the name of the valley to represent its function as the site at which the final decision concerning the nations takes place, Instead of the Valley of God's judgment, *Jehoshafat*, it was renamed the Valley of Decision – in Hebrew עמק ('emeq harutz):

Multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Decision for the day of the Lord is near in the Valley of Decision. (Joel, 3:14)

The events described are imaginary, but the valley is a real place. What gave this particular valley its place of honour on the day of the Lord is the fact that it was connected in its lower part to another valley to the south of Jerusalem called the Valley of Hinom. In Hebrew the two words of this name are גיא הנֶם, combined they form the word גיהנָם which is the term adopted in many languages for Hell: *jahannam* in Arabic and Persian (next to *dózakh* ),

*Gehenna* in English (following the Greek and Latin) . The idea to connect the valley to Hell was probably due to the presence of a continual fire burning the refuse of Jerusalem which was thrown into this valley. However, this is only a possibility not supported by the early sources. (See J.N. Schofield, in *Peak's Commentary of the Bible*, edited by Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London etc. 1962:32). The valley was called after a person or a family (Ben Hinnom) who owned the land. It became the location of worship of the Molech, to which children were sacrificed either actually, or symbolically by passing them through the fire, an abomination, which drew upon those who took part in it, the wrath of the prophets who named the valley *Tophet*, probably the name of the underworld and later Hell. Jeremiah, emphasizing the terrible practice of human sacrifices, renamed the place calling it “The valley of Slaughter. (Jer.7:32)

Therefore, behold the days come, saith the Lord, that this place shall no more be called Topheth nor the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. (Jer. 19:7)

Again we see the phenomenon that a concrete valley receives a symbolic name following an event or an activity which took place in it. In this case, the prophet promises that in the same valley where the *Molech* rituals used to take place, the councillors of the people of Judah and Jerusalem responsible for this abomination would be slaughtered, and subsequently the name of the valley would be changed to fit the event. Moreover, the valley of Hinnom, the *Tophet*, renamed the Valley of Decision (*emek harutz*), would become the burial ground of the wicked, “for they will bury in Tophet till there be no place”.

A valley in the Bible is used also as a metaphor but on the whole, as hinted above, the metaphor is based on the real physical valley. The Psalmist speaks about his being protected by God in the “Valley of the shadow of death.” (Ps. 23:4). The picture described is that of a shepherd leading his flocks through a valley to the spring. In the reality of the shepherd’s life, leading the flock through a verdant valley sounds very pastoral and romantic. But the valley could often be a valley of the shadow of death, a place where thieves and robbers lurked in ambush to rob the shepherd of his flock and sometimes his life. Where else, if not in such a valley, would the shepherd hope for divine protection? However, although the valley here is also a real one, the metaphor connected with it is clear: the valley of the shadow of death represents difficulties, dangers and hazards but the believer has faith in God’s eternal watchfulness and in divine intervention. In other words, the valley of the shadow of death is used in order to emphasise the idea of man’s absolute reliance on divine guidance as well as the certainty of God’s salvation: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”. (Ps.23:1)

A valley can be presented as the site of revelation “The valley of vision” in the words of Isaiah (22:1). In this case, the valley is not a real valley at all. The term valley is not used here to represent any certain site where the vision occurred, although the prophet could have hinted here to secluding himself in one of the valleys awaiting divine inspiration. And when the inspiration comes, the valley of vision is filled with the contents of this vision: “For it is a day of trouble... and of perplexity by the Lord God of Hosts in the valley of vision”. (Isaia,

23:5). This valley is the nearest Biblical example of the idea of the valley in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven and Four Valleys. There, also, the valleys are virtual stations on the way, each of which is reached after the effort of crossing a mountain. Once the traveller reaches the valley he enters into the realm of some spiritual state; it is reality which involves an experience as well. This experience is not exactly a vision, but the nearest possible to it, and since the arrival at the valley is a multiple occurrence, it is only natural that the finding in each occurrence is different than the finding or the reality met in the previous one. In the case of Isaiah there is only one valley (though it could be in many locations) but the vision is charged with several messages. The Jewish mystical interpretation has no need for the valley as such, and the expression "the valley of vision" is understood to mean the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence, which is the source of prophecy for the whole world. (*Zohar*, Genesis, ed. Margaliot, 7<sup>th</sup> printing, Jerusalem, 2000:203a. Hebrew and Aramaic)

Another approach to valleys is to look at them together with the mountains, which divide them, as obstacles. After all, in reality the traveller prefers the flat land with its easy access, to the ups and downs of the mountains and valleys. Therefore, when Isaiah describes the revelation of God's glory in the future, he uses the metaphor of a straight highway in a flat land. In this case both mountains and valleys disappear:

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the rugged ground shall be made straight and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." (Isaiah, 40:3-5)

In this case too, the basic reference in the prophecy is to real topographical features, real valleys and real mountains but used metaphorically to denote the idea that no obstacle would hinder divine revelation, and what could reflect this notion more than the fantastic picture of mountains lowering themselves and valleys raising up their beds.

The interpreters who wished to endow this description with a moral flavour likened mountains to the haughty and the arrogant, and valleys to the meek and downtrodden. This is also the attitude of the *Zohar*, the basic book of Jewish mysticism (quoted above), to these verses. Only that in the *Zohar* we find more concretisation of this simile of valleys and mountains: the valleys are the symbol of the people of Israel "who are humbler and lower than any nation and tongue", and the mountains and hills "are the wicked and the impudent." (*Zohar*, *Deut. (Ra 'yā Meheimanā)* ed. Margaliot, 280a. Hebrew, Aramaic). Still in the realm of Jewish mysticism, the Hebrew word *gay*, valley, in Isaiah's prophecy starts with *gimmel*, the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This fact is taken as far away as possible from the original physical valley and its metaphorical representation. The third letter of the Hebrew alphabet is interpreted to represent the third *sefirah* in the Kabala order of the emanations of the divine manifestation - the *sefirah of the supreme shekhīnah* (divine Presence on High, the third of the three highest emanations). This elevation of the third letter mentioned in the prophecy hints to another word beginning with the same letter – Gimmatry, namely the study

of the hidden meaning of the numerical value of letters. “About which it is said ‘Every valley shall be raised’ these are the Gimmatries that add savory taste to the Wisdom” (the second *sefirah* represented by the preceding letter *bet*). *ועלה אמר כל גיא יنشأ, וアイחו גימטריות פרפראות* (Tikkune Zohar, Tikkun 70 (‘ayin). Frish, Jerusalem, 1993: 120b).

Finally, back from mysticism to prophecy. The fact that a valley or part of it could be delineated as a site for the gathering of people, whether for peace or war, enabled the adoption of certain valleys and holy places for the practice of ritual activities such as the valley of Mina and plain ‘Arafat that are integral locations in the rituals of the *hajj*. This is the case in which a particular real valley becomes consecrated for the meeting, at a certain time, of multitudes of people. However, the prophets could envisage a picture in which a wide valley could become the site for an imaginary scene of gathering just as a real valley serves as the place for a real gathering, for instance of armies engaged in battle or in preparation for it. Even the great battle of Armageddon where the armies of the antichrist gather will take place in the wide valley of Jezreel at the foot of Mt. Megiddo (hence the name). (*Revelations*, 16:16)

One of the most famous descriptions of an imaginary symbolic gathering in a valley is Ezekiel’s “Vision of the Dry Bones”. The prophet describes how the hand of the Lord was upon him and he was carried out in the spirit of the Lord “and (He) set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones ... there were very many on the open valley, and they were very dry...” The vision continues with a dramatic and impressive description of the revival of the bones until they are transformed, stage by stage, into human beings. The vision is vivid and the prophet makes sure that the true meaning of it is clearly understood. The valley of the dry bones, which is the scene of the fantastic revival, is an allegory with a message:

... these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost ... Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God. Behold O my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come out of your graves... (Ezekiel, 37: 1-14, the whole vision)

This is a perfect example of valley, used metaphorically as the site of a vision, with a clear message which has nothing to do with the valley, but without which the prophet could not conjure up the vision. The imaginary wide and enclosed valley is the best place for a substantial accumulation of dry bones.

### ***Islamic concept compared***

The valley as the site where the prophet first received the news about his mission is also found in Islamic literature. It is the valley’s natural “inhabitants” the rocks and trees that become the divine messengers to the future prophet.

"The messenger of Allah at the time when Allah willed to bestow his grace upon him and endow him with prophethood would go forth for his affair and journey far afield until he reached the glens of Mecca and the beds of its valleys where no house was in sight; and not stone or tree that he passed by but would say 'Peace unto thee , O apostle of Allah' and the apostle would turn to his right and left and look behind him and would see naught but trees and stones."

(Ibn Hisham, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, Beirut, 1423/2002, 1:68. Translation, *The Life of Muhammad*. Ed. A. Guillaume. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1955:105)

This legend emphasizes the fact that the valley was the place where seclusion could be achieved and therefore a good place for a mystical experience. The best place for this seclusion to be attained was a valley in the desert, such as the place where Moses received his first revelation. It was near the Mount of Horeb (identified as Sinai) that Moses saw the burning bush and heard the divine voice calling his name, but it was not on the mountain but at the foot of the mountain. The same idea appears in the Qur'an in the stories about Moses and the burning bush: noticing the fire he went to see it, and "When he came to it a voice cried from the right bank of the valley in the sacred hollow, coming from the tree: 'Moses I am Allah the Lord of all Being'" (Q, 28:30, trans. Arberry with minor changes). Here the Qur'an uses the word *wādī*, valley explicitly, to describe the place where this mystical meeting occurred:

فَلَمَّا أتَاهَا نُودِي مِنْ شَاطِئِ الْوَادِ الْأَيْمَنِ فِي الْبَقْعَةِ الْمَبَارَكَةِ مِنَ الشَّجَرَةِ إِنِّي أَنَا مُوسَى إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ (ق، ٢٨)  
(القصص)، ٣٠

The image of the valley is very clear, and one can imagine Moses looking from one (the left) bank of the narrow watercourse to the other (right) bank. It is not a virtual valley for him but a specific site next to the "the Mountain". However, once the valley becomes the arena of the divine revelation it is elevated from an ordinary place to the station of the 'holy ground' (Hebrew: *admat qodesh*. Exodus, 3:5); 'the blessed ground' (Arabic: *al-buq'ah al-mubārakah*). This Qur'anic scene, similar but not identical with the report in the Bible (*Exodus*, 3), made great impression on Muslims, and the call of God to Moses from "the right bank" received a particular meaning and was transformed by interpreters and mystics into a universal experience of divine revelation. (See e.g. al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi' li-Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, Beirut 1987 13:280-283, interpreting Q, 28:29-30) It was particularly significant to Bahá'u'lláh who turned this scene, as we shall soon see, into the scene of his own revelation.

Let us go back for a moment to the Qur'anic usage of the term *wādī*. On the whole, as I mentioned above, all the valleys in the Qur'an are real valleys: the valley of Mecca figures in the prayer of Ibrāhīm (Abraham) as a barren valley (Q, 14:38); God speaks to Mūsā (Moses) in the "holy valley, Tuwā (Q, 20:12, 28:30, 79:16); the poets whom Muhammad abhors "wander in every valley" (Q, 26:225) the rain water fills the valleys (Q, 13:17, 46:24); and the warriors of Medina cross valleys for which Allah rewards them. (Q, 9:121)

## *Valleys in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*

There is hardly any question that among all the references to valleys in the Qur'an, the most impressive references, which appear in three different *suras*, are to the revelation to Moses in the holy valley Tuwā. As I have just pointed out, no wonder that these Qur'ānic verses containing the entire scenery of the revelation to Moses deeply inspired Bahá'u'lláh, who used almost the same words of the Qur'ān to describe his own revelation. In the Qur'ānic verses Moses approaches the fire which he observes "on the side of the mount."

When he came to it, a voice cried out from the right bank of the valley in the blessed ground."  
(Q, 28:30)

This holy valley, the right bank of this valley from where the voice came, and the nearness of the Mount Sinai (*at-tūr*), all these features accompanied Bahá'u'lláh throughout his life, and had great impression on him. Announcing his revelation in an epistle to Alexander II the Tsar of Russia (1855-1881), he uses the same Qur'ānic scenery, cast as an allegory, to deliver his prophetic message. Mentioning the fact that the Russian ambassador in Tehran interceded in his favour with the Persian government and secured his release from prison فد نصرني أحد ( سفرايک إذ كنت في السجن تحت السلسله he promises tsar a great reward for the benevolent act done in his name. (The ambassador who helped Bahá'u'lláh was in the time of tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855), not in the time of Alexander II.) However, he warns the tsar who enjoys sovereignty (*mulk*) that he should not forget who the true sovereign is. Asserting himself as that true sovereign (*al-mālik*) he proceeds to describe his revelation, as a manifestation of God, recalling the Qur'ānic scenery and combining it with additional references to the revelation of Jesus. The following passage from *Sūrat al-Haykal*, which includes the call to the kings and rulers (and from which the above reference was quoted) addressed to Alexander II includes this passage:

إِيَّاكَ أَنْ يُمْنَعَ الْمَلَكُ عَنِ الْمَالِكِ إِنَّهُ قَدْ أَتَى بِمَلْكُوْتِهِ وَتَنَادَى الْذَرَّاتُ قَدْ ظَهَرَ الرَّبُّ بِمَجْدِهِ الْعَظِيمِ قَدْ أَتَى  
الْأَبُ وَالْإِبْنُ فِي الْوَادِ الْمَقْدَسِ يَقُولُ لِبَيْكَ اللَّهُمَّ لِبَيْكَ وَالْطُورُ يَطْوِفُ حَوْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَالشَّجَرُ يَنْدَادِي بِأَعْلَى النَّدَاءِ  
قَدْ أَتَى الْوَهَّابُ رَاكِبًا عَلَى السَّحَابِ طَوْبَى لِمَنْ تَقْرَبَ إِلَيْهِ وَبَلْ لِلْمَبْعَدِينَ. (آثار قلم اعلى، مؤسسه معارف بهائي،

١٩٩٦ ج ١ ص ٥٢)

(My emphasis in bold. MS)

Beware lest thy sovereignty withhold thee from him who is the supreme sovereign. He, verily, is come with his kingdom, and all the atoms cry aloud: "Lo! The Lord is come in his great majesty!" He who is the Father is come, and the Son, in the holy vale, crieth out: "Here am I, Here am I, O Lord, my God!" while Sinai circleth round the House, and the Burning Bush calleth aloud: "The All-Bounteous is come mounted upon the clouds! Blessed is he that draweth nigh unto Him, and woe betide them that are far away." (*Suriy-i-Haykal. The summons of the Lord of Hosts. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh.* Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, p. 84)

The mystical scene describing the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in a few pictures, interwoven into each other, is set in a familiar environment for any Muslim who reads the Qur'ān. It should also be familiar to a Christian, like the tsar to whom the message was directed. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh specifically addresses the Christian ear alone when he refers to the appearance of "the Father and the Son" in the "holy vale." The mere mentioning of the Son with the Father is a pure Christian concept, and there is hardly other way to understand it but as breakaway from the Islamic axiomatic rejection of Jesus' Sonship. ("God is only One God. Glory be to Him that he should have a son." Q, 4:171. Trans. Arberry) Whichever way one turns, and even if one explains that Bahá'u'lláh regards himself as both the Father and the Son, there is still no question that we have here, at least, reference to, if not downright acceptance of, a Christian article of faith: of the son of God, and the identification of the Father and Son in the mystery of the Trinity.

The scene continues with the Mount of Sinai (*at-tūr*) circling the House (*al-bayt*); the House being the Ka'bah in Mecca and the picture is that of the circumambulations of the House by the pilgrims during the hajj. But here the picture has an added value of the good tidings of the appearance of the last manifestation of God: the House represents this manifestation and Sinai that encircles it represents the former revelation to Moses. The whole scene culminates with the picture of another facet of this manifestation, which represents Bahá'u'lláh in his claim to be the promised Messiah of all religions. But since his vision is directed at a Christian monarch, the description of his messianic appearance is virtually copied from Jewish and Christian sources. "The All-Bounteous is come mounted upon the clouds!" (قد اتى الوهاب راكباً على السحاب rises the thrilled voice of the "tree" (a general reference to the burning bush). Bahá'u'lláh uses here the term *wahhāb* "Bestower" (officially translated "all-Bounteous") to describe his own station and thus remains also within the framework of the Islamic "Beautiful Names" of God, one of which is "*al-wahhāb*." Concurrently there is full identification between his station as the manifestation of God and his messianic function and in the same vein he refers clearly to the Christian fundamental creed according to which Jesus is simultaneously the Messiah and the Son of God.

I have just quoted the allusion to the divine messiah riding on cloud. This is a direct copy of the most famous passages in the Bible describing the same scene: the first is in the Book of Daniel and the second in Revelation. Daniel's vision runs as follows:

חזה בְּהִיא בְּחִזְוֵי לַיְלָא וְאֶרְיוֹ עִם עֲנָנוֹ שְׁמִיא כִּבְרָא נָשָׁ אֲתָה הוּא וְעַד עַתִּיק יוֹמִיא מְטָה וְקַדְמוֹדִי הַקָּרְבָּנִי

I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. (Daniel, 7:13)

The same scene in Revelation (14:14) reads:

And I looked and, behold, a white cloud and upon the cloud one sat like the Son of Man having on his head a golden crown and in his hand a sharp sickle."

I feel that at this stage of his activity Bahá'u'lláh was more familiar with the Arabic translation of the New Testament than with that of the Hebrew Bible, and his writings directed at Christians relied on Christian sources and refer to Christian symbols such as the bold reference to the Father and Son.

In a similar tone and language Bahá'u'lláh casts the same scene in his *Lawh-i-Aqdas* – The Most Holy Tablet addressed to the Christians in general. He calls them “the Community of the Son” (*mala' al-ibn*), again using the Sonship of Jesus as a legitimate station to depict the relation between him and his Father, the Godhead. The passage which interests us, runs as follows:

قد اتصل نهر الأردن بالبحر الأعظم والإبن في الواد المقدس ينادي لبيك اللهم لبيك والطور يطوف حول البيت والشجر ينادي قد اتى المقصود بمجده المنيني قل قد جاء الآب وكمل ما وعديتم به في ملكوت الله هذه الكلمة التي سترها الإبن اذ قال لمن حوله انتم اليوم لا تحملونها فلما تم الميقات واتى الوقت اشرقت الكلمة من افق المشية اياكم يا ملأ الإبن أن تدعوها عن ورائكم تمسكوا بها هذا خير لكم عما عندكم انه ل قريب بالمحسنين

(*Majmū'at alwāḥ...ba'd-i- az Kitāb-i-Aqdas...Bahá'í Verlag*, Hofheim, Germany, 1980:4-5. My emphasis in bold. MS)

The river Jordan is joined to the Most Great Ocean, and the Son in the holy vale, crieth out: ‘Here am I, here am I O Lord, my God!’ whilst Sinai circleth round the House, and the Burning Bush calleth aloud: He Who is the Desired One is come in His transcendent majesty.’ Say, Lo! The Father is come, and that which ye were promised in the Kingdom is fulfilled! This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: ‘Ye cannot bear it.’ And when the appointed time was fulfilled and the Hour struck, the Word shone forth above the horizon of the Will of God. Beware, O followers of the Son, that ye cast it not behind your backs. Take ye fast hold of it. Better is this for you than all that ye possess. Verily He is nigh unto them that do good.

*Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, a compilation*. Baha'I Publishing Trust, New Delhi, India, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1998:202

The scene is the same as that in the Tablet of *Suriy-i-Haykal*. It is the same holy valley of the Qur'ān, the same Mount of Sinai, the same burning bush and same “House” around which Sinai circles. However, the Christian symbolism is far more pronounced. Here, the river Jordan pours into the Great Sea. The geographical features (the Jordan river pours into the Dead Sea which is a lake not a “most great ocean”) are immaterial in this case since both the Jordan river and the “greatest sea” represent a mystical message, not a geographical reality. In Baha'u'llah's vision, both the Jordan and the sea (*bahr* in Arabic is not ocean) are the symbols of two manifestations of God: The Jordan is Jesus whose revelation is very much connected with his baptism in the Jordan and the “Great Sea” is Bahá'u'lláh's revelation to which he himself repeatedly refers. The vision here describes the uninterrupted chain of

unending revelations moving always in the direction that leads to Baha'u'llah's revelation which should come naturally to the Christians since they must surely be aware of the fact that the river of Jesus pours and mingles with the water of the sea of Bahá'u'lláh who is the greatest. (For this interpretation see Fazil Mazandrani, *Asrār- al- Āthār* 1:93). The language is clearly Christian in that part of the tablet which speaks about Bahá'u'lláh as the Father and about his coming as the coming of the promised Kingdom. Such references are so abundant in the New Testament that no Christian can miss them. One example that comes immediately to mind is from Luke 12:32: "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (cf. Luke, 13:18) It should be emphasized again that when the scenes in the Holy Valley are directed at Christians, Bahá'u'lláh very daringly uses pure Christian images to the point of accepting the fundamentals of trinity.

Although this seems very bold for a former Muslim, it can be explained within the structure of Bahá'u'lláh's imagery. He regarded himself as the manifestation of the Father, whereas the Son was manifested by Jesus (who is almost always called *ar-rūh*, "the spirit"), while Moses is called "*al-kalīm*" – he who converse with God. Together with Muḥammad, and the Báb they are the manifestations that preceded him. This is how the Sonship of Jesus found its way from the heart of Christian theology into that of the Baha'í theology. The proper exegesis of the issue was supplied by a treatise of 'Abd al-Bahá, dedicated to the favourable authorized Bahá'í explanation of the Christian trinity in *Some Answered Questions* (p.114) In the same manner 'Abd al-Bahá explains the idea of the Sonship, which represents the reflection of the Father in the Son just as the sun is reflected in a mirror. (*Ibid*, 207)

Bahá'u'lláh uses a somewhat different terminology when the scene in the Holy Valley is described to the Bábí's, defined as the community of the Bayan (*mala' al-bayan*)

Here the language is a little different. Referring to those Bábís who rejected him he says that they spread their hypocrisy all over and broke the covenant,

في يَوْمٍ فِيهِ اسْتَوَى هِيَكَلُ الْقَدْمِ عَلَى العَرْشِ الْأَعْظَمِ وَنَادَى الْمُنَادِ مِنْ الشَّطَرِ الْأَيْمَنِ فِي الْوَادِي الْمُقَدَّسِ. يَا مَلَأَ الْبَيَانِ اتَّقُوا الرَّحْمَنَ هَذَا هُوَ الَّذِي ذَكَرَهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَمَنْ قَبْلَهُ الرُّوحُ وَمَنْ قَبْلَهُ الْكَلِيمُ. وَهَذَا نُقْطَةُ الْبَيَانِ يُنَادِي أَمَمَ الْعَرْشِ وَيَقُولُ تَالَّهِ قَدْ خُلِقْتُ لِذِكْرِ هَذَا النَّبِيِّ الْأَعْظَمِ وَهَذَا الصَّرَاطُ الْأَفْوَمُ الَّذِي كَانَ مَكْنُونًا فِي أَفْئِدَةِ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَمَخْرُونًا فِي صُدُورِ الْأَصْفَيَاءِ. وَمَسْطُورًا مِنَ الْفَلَمِ الْأَعْلَى فِي أَلْوَاحِ رَبِّكُمْ مَالِكِ الْأَسْمَاءِ.

*Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Arabic and Persian). Bahá'í Verlag, Hofheim, Germany, 1980:58

(The rejectionists acted)...on the day when the immortal being (literally: The Ancient Temple) mounted his throne and the crier raised his voice from the heaven of security and peace in the holy vale. O, followers of the Bayan! Fear ye the All Merciful. This is the one who hath been glorified by Muḥammad, the apostle of God, and before him by the Spirit (Jesus), and yet before him by the one who discoursed with God (Moses). This is the point of

the Bayán calling aloud before the Throne saying: By the righteousness of God, you have been created to glorify this Most Great Announcement, this Perfect Way, which lay hid in the souls of the prophets, which was treasured in the hearts of the chosen ones of God and was written down by the glorious Pen of your Lord the Possessor of names.' (*Ishráqát, Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1998:255)

The scene is more or less the same and the valley is the same valley – the Holy Valley, but the Son and the Father are missing. Instead, Bahá'u'lláh in the polemics with the Bábís (and probably the followers of Mirza Yahyā) who rejected him, uses terms, which are more acceptable to them, particularly the word *rūh*, spirit, to describe Jesus. For himself, however, he still uses his favoured term, *haykal al-qidam* – the Temple of Ancient Time (official translation: “immortal Being”).

Although the expression “the holy valley” refers to a specific valley in which the revelation to Moses occurred according to both the Bible and the Qur’ān, in Bahá'u'lláh's writings it is used to represent the mystery of his revelation. Moses, Jesus and Muhammad serve in the scene as witnesses to the truth of his station.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá Bahá'u'lláh's son, heir and interpreter simplifies his father's vision. Referring to the “holy valley” scene in a prayer on behalf of the believers who followed Bahá'u'lláh he says:

My lord! They are these who heard a caller who summoned to belief: “Have faith in your Lord,” following which they believed and repented and were illuminated by the lamp of guidance and the luminary of the celestial concourse, and became familiar with the fire that burns and shines in the Holy Valley – the Sinai of Truth, the Paran of Gnosis and rose to defend your cause... (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátib ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, Tehran, 133/1977:62)

Here the scene in the holy valley is an allegory representing Bahá'u'lláh's manifestation, putting his revelation on par with the former manifestations symbolized by the circumambulation of Sinai around the House and the calling out of the Son and the burning bush.

### ***Four Valleys and Seven Valleys, a note***

Usually when valleys are mentioned in the context of the Bahá'í religion the *Seven Valleys* and the *Four Valleys* are mentioned. But these valleys should be regarded as a literary device. Moreover since these compositions were written for ṣūfīs, Bahá'u'lláh used the same system of seven valleys, and the same name of each valley, that had been employed by Farīd ad-Dīn ‘Attār in his *Conference of the Birds* (*Manṭiqu ’Tayr*). No specific names were given to the Four Valleys, but in each one of them the wayfarer searches for one of the four attributes of God, namely the manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh, symbolized by each one of

these attributes: *al-Maqṣūd* – the intended one, *al-mahmūd* – the praiseworthy one, *al-Majdhub* –the attracting one, and finally *al-mahbūb* – the beloved one.

Beyond the fact that valleys are used here only because they are familiar to *sūfīs*, they are not necessary for the ideas put forward by Bahá'u'lláh, unlike the holy valley which is central to the message behind it. Instead of the seven and four valleys, Bahá'u'lláh could have used other objects for the wayfarer to cross in his journey with the same efficiency such as mountains, caves, forests, rivers, and so on.

Valleys and other geographical sites in religion are important only when they are the scene of a holy event, when they convey a particular spiritual message, or when they are identified with an event, real or legendary, which turns them into holy sites.

### ***Appendix: More on Valleys in Islamic tradition – compared***

There are three Islamic traditions in two of which valleys appear in moral teachings and one represents a common legend about the dwelling places of demons.

Valley in Hell:

"There is a valley in Hell (*jahannam*) called *Habhab*. It is the home of every tyrant." (*Inna fī Jahannam wādiyān yuqāl lahu habhab yaskunuhu kukull jabbār*), ad-Dārimi, 'Addallah b. 'Abd ar-Rahmān. *Sunan*, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, Beirut, 1407/1984, 2: 427 = *Riqāq*, 95, No. 2816.

It is very possible that the name of the valley in hell *habhab* comes from the Hebrew: "give give." This combination *hab!* *hab!* Give! Give! is also in Arabic in the same meaning. In the book of Proverbs this combination refers to the two daughters of the horseleech, crying: Give! Give! All three can never be satiated, נִשְׁבַּעֲנָה שְׂתֵי בָנֹות הַבָּשָׁלָךְ לֹא תִשְׁבַּע נֶגֶן and the proverb compares them to other things which can never be satiated. (*Proverbs*, 30:15). It is therefore not surprising that this valley in Hell is the habitat of the tyrants who can never be satisfied.

Valley in a proverb about the greediness of men:

"Had a man possessed two valleys full of money he would have coveted to have a third one. Nothing fills up the throat of man but soil." (*law kāna li'bni ādam wādiyān nim māl la'btagha ilayhim thālithān walā yamla'u jawfi 'bni ādam illā 't-turāb*. Dārimi, ibid No. 62, p. 410. )

This Islamic description of the avaricious person is reminiscent of the verse in Ecclesiastes 5:9 בַּקְשֵׁר לֹא יִשְׁבַּע כַּסְף "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver" (KJV, 5:10). The valleys in the ḥadīth contribute to the visual aspect of the never-ending pursue of money from which a lesson must be learnt: that although during lifetime the greedy person can never be satisfied with any amount of money which he accumulates, after death a handful of earth plugs his throat.

Valleys inhabited by demons:

"The demons descended that night on the messenger of Allah from the valleys and the glens." (*inna 'shayātīn taḥaddarat tilka 'laylah 'alā rasūli 'llāh min 'l-awdiyah wa- 'shshi'āb*.

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad* 3:419.