

MAKING THE CROOKED STRAIGHT

A CONTRIBUTION TO BAHÁ'Í  
APOLOGETICS

by

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*Quod curiositate cognoverunt, superbia  
amiserunt.*

St Augustine, *Sermones* 151

*Souls such as these cause the straight to  
become crooked.*

'Abdu'l-Bahá

*Will and Testament* 2:13

*Melius est, ut scandalum oriatur, quam  
ut veritas relinquatur.*

Pope Gregory the Great (Hom.  
VII in Ezekiel, quoted from *Migne  
Patrologiae Cursus Completus  
Series Latina*, vol. 76, p. 842)

His promulgation of his mission opened up a new chapter in the history of religion: that of the Bahá'í Faith. In his scripture, the Báb had repeatedly indicated the coming of 'Him whom God shall make manifest' (*Man yuzhiruhu'lláh*). Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be that very figure of prophecy.

The Báb wrote of the concept of progressive revelation, which is confirmed in the scripture of Bahá'u'lláh. This doctrine is based on the idea that there is only one God, who guides and teaches humanity by means of religion. Hence, all the major religions originate from a single source and are meant to guide people to lead their lives in accordance with the will of God and to promote the development of the human race. In the text *Dalá'il-i-Sab'ih*, the Báb speaks of the Messengers of God in the following terms:

In the time of the First Manifestation the Primal Will appeared in Adam; in the day of Noah it became known in Noah; in the day of Abraham in Him; and so in the day of Moses; the day of Jesus; the day of Muḥammad, the Apostle of God; the day of the 'Point of the Bayán'; the day of Him Whom God shall make manifest; and the day of the One Who will appear after Him Whom God shall make manifest. Hence the inner meaning of the words uttered by the Apostle of God, 'I am all the Prophets', inasmuch as what shineth resplendent in each one of Them hath been and will ever remain the one and the same sun.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, the founder of each religion simultaneously announces the coming of the next divine Messenger:

The Lord of the universe hath never raised up a prophet nor hath He sent down a Book unless He hath established His covenant with all men, calling for their acceptance of the next Revelation and of the next

104. The Báb, *Selections* 4:10:6 (p. 126); see also 3:39:1 (Persian Bayán II:8).

Book; inasmuch as the outpourings of His bounty are ceaseless and without limit.<sup>105</sup>

Believers are therefore required to recognize and accept the Word of God in its new form if they are to continue to receive divine guidance. For this reason, the Báb demands that the Muslims recognize him.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, the Bábís should turn to 'Him who God shall make manifest' as soon as he should appear.<sup>107</sup> The moment a new revelation appears, it fulfils the prophecy of the previous religion and supersedes it. The Báb praises the Promised One and mentions him, as Browne correctly states,<sup>108</sup> on every page of the Persian Bayán. The Báb constantly exhorts his followers to accept the Promised One and not to cause him the same suffering as that which the Báb himself had endured at the hands of unbelievers. He orders the Bábís to repeat every nineteen days a verse from the Bayán on the subject of acceptance of the Promised One.<sup>109</sup> Finally, he stresses the rank of the Promised One by stating that the glory (*Bahá'*) of the Bayán is *Man yuzhiruhu'lláh*.<sup>110</sup>

#### 1. The prophecy concerning the advent of *Man yuzhiruhu'lláh*

The Báb evidently foresaw the imminent advent of the Promised One whom he described in such glowing terms. This is clear from many of the statements he made to contemporaries,

105. *ibid.* 3:12:1 (Persian Bayán VI:16 (p. 87)).

106. *ibid.* 3:20:2; 4:3:1; 4:5:2.

107. *ibid.* 3:21:1; 3:24:1; 3:26:1; 3:32:1; 3:37:1; 5:4:1; 5:5:2; 5:6:1; 5:7:1; 5:8:1; 5:9:2; 6:4:1; 6:13:2 and others.

108. *JRAS* XXI.IV (October 1889), p. 927.

109. Persian Bayán VI:8.

110. *ibid.* III:14: *كل بهاء بيان من يظهره الله است*. This verse not only emphasizes the exalted station of the Promised One but may also be understood as an allusion to the person of Bahá'u'lláh.

whom he exhorted to recognize both himself and—as soon as he appeared—the promised *Man yuzhiruhu'lláh*. In a letter written to a Muslim clergyman named Sulaymán, for instance, he called upon the addressee to turn to him (the Báb), since he would otherwise be accursed. If he failed to accept the Báb, God would forgive him only if he turned, by means of a letter, to 'Him whom God shall make manifest'<sup>111</sup>—i.e. in the near future, during Sulaymán's lifetime. From another letter, written by the Báb to the Sharif of Mecca and others, it is again evident that the Báb expected the Promised One to appear during the lifetime of the Sharif. The Báb admonished the Sharif of Mecca

to embrace the Cause of God and to implore that the matter of thine allegiance be brought to the attention of Him Whom God shall make manifest, that He may graciously enable thee to prosper and cause thy fire to be transformed into light.<sup>112</sup>

Furthermore it is implied in the Persian Bayán that *Man yuzhiruhu'lláh* would appear during the 19 years following the Báb's declaration of his mission (1844); i.e. in the period up to the year 1863, although God alone would know the hour of his coming.<sup>113</sup> The early Bábís, too, clearly expected the Promised

111. The Báb, *Selections* 1:9:7.

112. *ibid.* 1:7:3 (p. 30).

113. Persian Bayán VI:3. The Persian text reads as follows:

در ظهور من يظهره الله خداوند عالم است که در چه حد از  
سن ظاهر فرماید اورا ولی از مبداء ظهور تا عدد واحد  
مراقب بوده که در هر سنه اظهار ایمان بحرقی ظاهر گردد

... i.e. 'And concerning the manifestation of Him Whom God shall manifest, God knows in what limit of years He will manifest him; but his advent is to be expected from the beginning of the Revelation until the number of the Wáhid (19) for in each year the announcement of the Faith may occur at any moment.' Browne's translation of this passage is somewhat inaccurate: 'And concerning the manifestation of Him whom God shall manifest, God knows in what limit of years He will manifest him; but watch from the beginning of the Manifestation until the num-

One to arrive soon.<sup>114</sup> Only this can explain the fact that during the years immediately following the martyrdom of the Báb so many proclaimed themselves to be the Promised One.

In contrast to this, the Azalí doctrine that the Promised One was to appear only after 1511 or 2001 years was based on statements made by the Báb in the Persian Bayán concerning *Ghiyáth* (Help) and *Mustagháth* (He who is called upon for help),<sup>115</sup> from which the numbers 1511 and 2001 are derived by means of the Abjad system. This is interpreted as an indication that the promised *Man yuzhiruhu'lláh* will not appear until this length of time has elapsed.<sup>116</sup> This argument was probably developed by the Azalís in order to dismiss Bahá'u'lláh's claim. They certainly referred to this in their rejection of Bahá'u'lláh, as Browne confirms: 'To these texts<sup>117</sup> the Ezelís specially appeal in justification of their rejection of Behá'u'lláh's claim to be the Promised Deliverer . . .'<sup>118</sup> It is clear from the words of the Báb in the Persian Bayán, however, that the Azalí view does not conform to that of the Báb when the latter expresses the hope that the Promised One would come before the end of the *Mustagháth*:

None knoweth save God as to when the Manifestation shall be. Whenever it occurs all have to follow the

ber of the Wáhid (19) for in each year Faith in one of the letters will appear' (Browne, 'A Summary of the Persian Bayán', in Momen, *Selections*, p. 376). In the Persian original, the crucial phrase is *bi-harfi zāhir gardad*, the term *bi-harfi* expressing that the revelation will appear through a single letter of the Promised One, i.e. suddenly. This sudden appearance is also prophesied elsewhere in the Persian Bayán; see also Browne, *JRAS* XXI.III (July 1889), p. 515.

114. Mírzá Haydar-'Alí confirms in his memoirs that: 'In those days many were convinced that the advent of "Him Whom God shall make manifest" could not be far off' (*Stories from the Delight of Hearts*, p. 8).

115. Persian Bayán II:17, III:15.

116. See *Kitáb-i-Nuqţatu'l-Káf*, Intro., pp. xxvf.

117. On *Mustagháth*.

118. *JRAS* (April 1892), p. 299.

Point of Truth and thank God. However, it is hoped of God's grace that it will arrive before the *Mustagháth* and the Word of God will be exalted by it.<sup>119</sup>

It is obvious from these words that the Báb regards the *Mus-tagháth* as a period of time during which the Manifestation will appear. Bahá'u'lláh evidently shares the Báb's cyclical view and also sees *Ghiyáth* and *Mustagháth* as cycles within which the Promised One will appear. He speaks of the year 9 within the *Mustagháth* in which *Man yuzhiruhu'lláh* has appeared.<sup>120</sup> In response to the Azalí objection that he was already announcing the advent of the Promised One, Bahá'u'lláh argued:

Shake off, O heedless ones, the slumber of negligence, that ye may behold the radiance which His glory hath spread through the world. How foolish are those who murmur against the premature birth of His light. O ye who are inly blind! Whether too soon or too late, the evidences of His effulgent glory are now actually manifest. It behoveth you to ascertain whether or not such a light hath appeared. It is neither within your power nor mine to set the time at which it should be made manifest. God's inscrutable Wisdom hath fixed its hour beforehand.<sup>121</sup>

The Báb, too, was convinced that the Promised One 'might appear at any time',<sup>122</sup> as Browne correctly observed.

119. Persian Bayán III:15. The Persian text reads:

عالم بظهور نیست غیر الله هر وقت شود باید کل تصدیق  
بنقطه حقیقت نمایند و شکر الهی بجا آورند اگرچه امید از  
فضل اوست که تا مستغاث نرسد از قبل کلمه الله مرتفع گردد

120. *Rahiq-i-Makhtúm*, p. 514. The year nine refers to the summons experienced by Bahá'u'lláh in Teheran in the year 1852/53, nine years after the Declaration of the Báb. On *Mustagháth* see also *Kitáb-i-Iqán* 276 (p. 248).

121. *Gleanings* 50.

122. *A Traveller's Narrative*, Intro., p. XVII.

## 2. Two alleged proofs of the supremacy of Mírzá Yaḥyá in Baghdád

After the attempt by a Bábí to assassinate Násiri'd-Dín Sháh in 1852, an unprecedented wave of persecution swept over the Bábís, with large numbers being arrested, tortured and killed. Bahá'u'lláh, too, was arrested and imprisoned<sup>123</sup> for four months in the Siyáh-Chál, a foul-smelling, vermin-infested, subterranean dungeon in Teheran, until he was released as a result of the combined intervention of the Russian ambassador, Count Dolgorouki, pressure from his family and reports produced by the courts dealing with the case.<sup>124</sup> In spite of his innocence, Bahá'u'lláh was compelled to leave the country shortly afterwards. He was exiled to Baghdád,<sup>125</sup> then part of the Ottoman

123. The official Teheran gazette *Vaqáyi-yi-Ittisfáqiyyih* reported that Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí Núrí (Bahá'u'lláh's original name) and several other Bábís, who had not been found guilty of conspiracy, had been condemned by His Majesty to life imprisonment (issue no. 82 dated 10 D iq'adih 1268 AH/26 August 1852 CE). See the English translation of this newspaper report, which provides an unvarnished account of the persecution inflicted on the Bábís, in *World Order: A Bahá'í Magazine*, vol. 13.2 (Winter 1978-79), pp. 12f.

124. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 104f.

125. A decree issued by Násiri'd-Dín Sháh commanded Bahá'u'lláh to leave Persian territory within one month of his release from prison, although he was permitted to select the country of exile himself, as Ficcichia rightly points out (*Bahā'ism*, p. 103; see also Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 106). Russia's diplomatic representative, Count Dolgorouki, offered Bahá'u'lláh asylum in the territories of the Russian Empire. However, Bahá'u'lláh did not take up this offer, choosing to go to Baghdád instead 'in pursuance of an unerring instinct' (ibid.), and possibly also to avoid being accused of political partisanship (see Bahá'í International Community (ed.), *Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 9). Ficcichia's assertion (*Bahā'ism*, p. 103) that 'according to his own testimony' Bahá'u'lláh 'was escorted to the border by a guard of honour' is incorrect. The statement made by Bahá'u'lláh to which Ficcichia here refers says only that the party was 'escorted by officers in the service of the esteemed and honoured governments of Persia and Russia' (*Epistle* 36 (p. 22))—something quite different from a 'guard of honour'.