

Review of "Symbolism in the Badi' Calendar" by Robin Mīhrshahi

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In Volume 12 of the *Baha'i Studies Review*, Robin Mīhrshahi has written a thorough overview of the symbolism behind the *badi* calendar, that is, the calendar that structures sacred time for the Baha'is of the world. This is an important subject, as sacred calendars are important markers of religious identity, and at this comparatively early stage of development of the world Baha'i community, far from being a routinised, largely unconscious way of marking time, as elder, more established calendars may be for the majority of those who follow them, the Baha'i calendar remains, for the overwhelming majority of its followers, true to its name, *badi*, meaning new and wondrous.

The communal significance of the *badi* calendar, the sense of newness and wonder that it engenders in many believers, is well evoked by Hand of the Cause and sicle of 'Abdu'l-Baha, John Esselemont whose introduction to the Baha'i Faith, written in 1923, remains today many Baha'is' first exposition of the significance of the *badi* calendar:

“Among different peoples and at different times many different methods have been adopted for the measurement of time and fixing of dates, and several different calendars are still in daily use, e.g., the Gregorian in Western Europe, the Julian in many countries of Eastern Europe, the Hebrew among the Jews, and the Muhammadan in Muslim communities.

The Báb signaled the importance of the dispensation which He came to herald, by inaugurating a new calendar ...In the not far distant future it will be necessary that all peoples in the world agree on a common calendar. It seems, therefore, fitting that the new age of unity should have a new calendar free from the objections and associations which make each of the older calendar unacceptable to large sections of the world's population, and it is difficult to see how any other arrangement could exceed in simplicity and convenience that proposed by the Báb”¹

At the same time, the subject of the Baha'i calendar remains mystifying to the majority of believers, beyond the widely disseminated notion that the number 19 is a symbol of unity, and the broad spiritual framework so eloquently, if concisely, expressed by Esslemont. The concept of intercalary days, let alone their designation as “days of Ha” is puzzling, as are the possible meanings behind the names of days and months and their ordering. Mīhrshahi's article is perhaps the first comprehensive elucidation in print of the complex symbology underlying these mysteries, bringing together judiciously and comprehensively much of the existing secondary literature on the subject. Given his reliance on secondary sources and translations, Mīhrshahi's paper is remarkable in the thoroughness with which it engages with matters frequently esoteric and obscure elucidated in texts little known to Western, and frequently Iranian believers too, and is a sign of the robust secondary literature that has emerged in matters Babi-Bahai.

¹ Esselemont, J.E. (1980). *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 5th ed., Wilmette, Illinois, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p.286

In a subject dense with allusions and implicit meanings, Mihrshahi is careful to distinguish between scripturally clearly affirmed elucidations and interpretations of the matters and hand, and credible, indeed, hard to deny inferences which nevertheless are not explicit in the texts. Briefly dealing with Shaykhi antecedents, Mihrshahi's paper concentrates on the Babi substratum in the symbolism of the *badi* calendar, adding a brief note on Baha'u'llah's completion of the Babi calendar before concluding. This is logical, given that the calendar was in fact formulated by the Bab, who devoted a great deal of space in His writings to elucidating numerological and ontological concepts closely associated with the *badi* calendar, such as those highlighted by Mihrshahi under the headings: the Bab's concept of 'all things'; *Kullu Shay'* and the computation of time; 'All things' and the *Badi* calendar; the significance of the seven day week; and the coming of 'Him Whom God shall make manifest'.

At the heart of Mihrshahi's paper lie four key concepts:

- 1) The concept of the world as text, in which the whole universe is, in genesis and expression both, but a material parallel to spiritual realities contained and symbolized in the word of God, itself encapsulated in the opening sentence of the Qur'an, and ultimately reduced to the point that initiates its very first letter. The *badi* calendar is held to symbolically embody an allusion to this intellectually mysterious, spiritually profound cosmogenic and ontological concept, which it is not our purpose to elucidate further. (see...)
- 2) The number 19 as an ordering principle behind the Word of God as conceived by the Bab, and consequently behind the entire universe, and the *badi* calendar as expressing and reinforcing this ordering principle in the sacred computation of time.
- 3) The importance and variegated use of the number 7 as a symbological resource in the Babi writings, as a way of engaging with the 7 day week of the *Badi* calendar. Whereas in the case of the number 19 there is abundant textual evidence directly linking the concepts Mihrshahi discusses to the structure and meaning of the Babi calendar, and hence his exposition of this idea flows naturally and authoritatively, the symbolism of the number 7 and the use of heptadic structures elsewhere in the Babi writings is not clearly linked to the *badi* calendar itself, save by way of correspondence. Indeed, beyond the fact of a seven day week, the number 7, or its associated referents, unlike the number 19 (with its key referent of the *bismillah* and the concept of 'all things' or *kullu shay'*, is not discussed in the Babi writings in connection with the *badi* calendar, so that the wealth of symbolism brought together by Mihrshahi in this context carries allusive, rather than directly expository weight. Given, however, that sacred calendars, in their evocation of sacred time, are quintessentially subjective experiences, the wealth of symbological material may prove immensely enriching to believers seeking to find meaning in the strictures of the *badi* calendar, and in particular in a seven day week that is already a common calendrical framework for Jews, Christians, Muslims, and the overwhelming majority of humanity navigating what has become a largely desacralised, even prosaic, secular marker of time. By providing a wealth of potentially relevant religious symbology, Mihrshahi's paper may be of help to believers seeking to endow their

experience of time with sacred meaning, as a way of evoking spirituality in an increasingly frenetically time-driven world. (see book about moment)

- 4) The messianic charge behind both, the formulation of the *badi* calendar, and its completion by Baha'u'llah, and, for believers in the latter, the divine intertextuality of Baha'u'llah's writings and institutions and those of the Bab as both, independent Manifestation of God and Divine Legislator, and as Herald of One Whose ardent lover the Bab declared Himself to be. In this context the *badi* calendar emerges as a love-song, mutually sung in turn by the Bab and by Baha'u'llah, bring one another to remembrance in the passing of sacred time and in the religious practice of believers, in the fast and the New Year respectively.

In setting down the possible meanings of the *badi* calendar, Mihrshahi, while careful in both making, and distinguishing personal inferences from scriptural elucidations, is not shy to offer his own interpretations, which are frequently not verifiable as scripturally connected links, yet are personally allusive, and potentially enriching to others with whom it might resonate, as in his suggestion that an early focus in the Bab's writings on heptadic structures, followed by and emphasis on 14 and finally in His later writings on 19, mirrors the cosmogenetic progression numerologically described by the Bab in some of His writings. These are broad leaps of personal interpretation, while far from being fully evidenced or obvious, are set out with great caution and provisionality ("One could state", "Possibly... the Bab thus placed a great emphasis" (p.26)).

He is equally careful to emphasise the provisionality of his elucidations when making interpretations that seem altogether conclusive, even if not explicitly stated in scripture, as in Mihrshahi's association of the intercalary days, in their designation as days of *Ha*, with God's invisible essence, sanctified above all attributes even as the intercalary days have been sanctified above the divine names pertaining to the 19 months of the *badi* calendar. Most people acquainted with Babi-Bahai elucidations of the letter *Ha* will consider such an interpretation all but self-evident, as the citations Mihrshahi offers in support demonstrate, yet, in the absence of an explicit text making such a link, Mihrshahi is just as cautious in his tone ("this might therefore indicate" (p.30)). Such hermeneutical discipline is one of the methodological strengths of his paper, that might be usefully emulated by anyone engaging in scriptural hermeneutics.

The comprehensiveness of this article means that it provides a very useful starting point and introduction for anyone wanting to venture into the deep waters of Babi numerological symbolism, as well as for those merely seeking to find deeper meanings in their religious calendar. Given its potential usefulness in these two respects, the lack of reference to an additional ordering scheme specifically for the *badi* calendar enunciated in Persian Bayan 5:3 might be considered a minor omission in Mihrshahi's article, one which it might be useful, by way of comprehensiveness, to address in this review.

In Browne's abridged translation we read:

“Wahid V, Chapter 3. *Concerning the knowledge of the years and months.* God hath fixed the number of all years from [the time of] the Manifestation of the Bayan according to the 'Names of All Things' (=361) and hath fixed each year at 19 months, and each month at 19 days, in order

that all may behold the Letters of the Unity in 19 degrees from the Point of the Sun into the Sign of Aries until its final arrival in the Sign of Pisces. And the first month is to be called *Baha*, and the last *'Ala*. And the three first months are chiefly set apart for Glorification (*tasbih*) since in them is created the Fire in the Hearts of All Things; and in the four following months, which are the months of Praise (*tahmid*), are created the Spirits of all Contingent things, for in them is Sustenance given; and in the six subsequent months, which are the months of Unification (*tawhid*), God causeth existing things to die, not by a bodily death, but by a Death from Denial and a Life in Affirmation; and in the subsequent six months, which are the months of Magnification (*takbir*), God gives life to the people who have died from love of all that is beside Him, and have remained firmly established in His Love.

“And in the first three months is the Fire of God; and in the four subsequent months, the Air of Eternity without Beginning (*Azal*); and in the six subsequent months the Water of Unification, which runs over the Souls of all things, from the air of Eternity which is projected from the Fire of God; and the subsequent six months are connected with the Earth, for what appeared from the three elements has become fixed in those three elements.”²

The *badi* calendar may be considered a symbological symphony, where a host of different melodies are played simultaneously in one great harmony, and as the ear becomes attuned to its allusions, more and more tonalities can be discerned, each distinctive and individually meaningful, and adding to the whole a dimension that goes beyond purely logical analysis to enter the subjective realm of contemplation, beauty and the sacred. Mihrshahi's paper addresses a number of melodies and tonalities in this great symphony of meanings, and might have profited from making mention of the zodiacal dimension introduced by the Bab at the outset of this pregnant passage of the Persian Bayan. This is a symbological dimension that, being common to the Western tradition, might prove meaningful to many, and a rich source of further contemplation. This is not the place, nor mine the expertise to explore this area further, however the second dimension not mentioned in Mihrshahi's valuable paper, is one which seems to me of great beauty and evocativeness, and to instill into the Baha'i sense of sacred time and chronology a sense of spiritual rhythm and evolution that might prove a rich ground for contemplation. Given that this is a commentary, and not a full paper, I will limit myself here to highlighting some pertinent points linked to this evocative passage, and leave more in depth treatment for a different occasion.

In the passage above, the 19 months are in turn subdivided into 4 periods of three, four, six, and six months respectively. This is a pattern to which we will return. The Bab sets out in these four periods what could be possibly considered an “ideal type”³ for our spiritual progression and rhythm through the months of each year. The first period, associated with the element of fire is centred on the glorification of God (*tasbih*), and are designed to enkindle the heart of all things, our own included. The second period moves to a focus on praising God (*tahmid*), partaking of the quality of water which sustains all life, and in this period one's consciousness is focused on

² From “A Summary of the Persian Bayan” in Moojan Momen (ed), *Selection from the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, section 3, Oxford: George Ronald, 1987.

³ We are aware that in using the term we are stretching its strictly sociological referents, but find the term serves by way of analogy.

our receipt of the sustenance of God. The third phase is dedicated to the awareness of the singleness of God, to the dying to all that is not of God, to negation, as a prelude to a life of obedience or affirmation (an allusion to the pre-existent question God asks of mankind: “Am I not Thy Lord?”, as told in Qur’an 7:172-4).⁴ The final phase, akin to the element of earth, is devoted to the magnification of God (*takbir*), reaping the fruits of the spiritual preparation of the previous 13 months in the shape of a life in God and for God, in recognition and praise of the things that subsist when all that is not God, has been overcome. The idea of a progression from spiritual enkindlement, through spiritual progress, to a point of spiritual death (*fana*) to our lower nature and worldly desires as a prelude to a final life (*baqa*) of spiritual union with God underlies a great many spiritual schemes within and outside the Babi-Baha’i traditions, whether the trajectory be divided into three, seven, eight, or nine phases, to name but three of many such schemes found in the writings.⁵ In a sense then, this division links the symbolism of the passing of the year to the spiritual progression of the soul from attraction to final union with God.

This fourfold subdivision, far from being accidental, is a central part of the later writings of the Bab, and in particular of His final cosmological scheme set out in the Qur’an, and is an integral part of the Bab’s exposition of the concept of all things (*kull shay’*) and the place of the number 19 in His symbolic universe. It is certainly far more prominent in the Persian Bayan than the heptadic scheme explored by Mihrsahi in the latter half of his paper, and, given the prominence given to it in the ordering of the *badi* calendar, it is worth diving more deeply into.⁶

⁴ Cf. Todd Lawson, “Seeing Double”, in *Bahai and other religions*

⁵ See for instance 7 valleys, Gems, Tablet to Byzantines, stages of certitude, three baptisms, etc.

⁶ For a summary of these tetrads in the calendar see Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, pp.327-328