

SYMBOL AND SECRET: QUR'AN COMMENTARY IN BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S KITÁB-I ÍQÁN (Volume 7, Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions)

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Christopher Buck's *Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i Íqán* can be seen as a work of genius: it is groundbreaking—daring, innovative, and even brilliant—and yet it can be frustratingly opaque.

Like Frank Lewis in his review article in volume 6 of *Bahá'í Studies Review*, this reviewer was struck by Juan Cole's introduction, which states that this is "the first book-length academic study devoted entirely to a major work of Bahá'í scripture" (xi).¹ This aside, there is another area in which *Symbol and Secret* breaks ground. Based on Christopher Buck's 1991 master's thesis under Islamicist Andrew Rippin, *Symbol and Secret* broaches topics which, though crucially important to Bahá'í scholarship, have largely been ignored by the Bahá'í community, namely, Islam and its relation to the theology and scripture of Bahá'u'lláh.² To anyone who studies the early history of the Bahá'í Faith or the symbolism and cultural influences in the sacred writings, however, the need for a thorough understanding of Islam becomes apparent. "Bahá'u'lláh was, after all, a Muslim," Buck points out in speaking of Bahá'u'lláh's cultural heritage (87). It is only through investigations into Islam that certain textual allusions, metaphors, symbolic representations, technical terms, cultural assumptions, and even writing styles in the earlier Bahá'í scriptures can become transparent.

Shoghi Effendi singled out the Kitáb-i-Íqán as "the most important book written on the spiritual significance of the Cause,"³ and it can be seen as the central book of Bahá'í theology. It stands in a unique historical position. Ostensibly a book written by a Bábí, for Bábís, and in defense of the Báb, it was revealed on the eve of Bahá'u'lláh's official declaration of 1863 and soon came to be seen as a book written by a Bahá'í, for Bahá'ís, and in defense of

1. To be correct, Cole's statement should have read that *Symbol and Secret* is the first published book-length academic study; it was preceded by Diana Malouf's 289-page dissertation "The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh: Translation Norms Employed by Shoghi Effendi" (State University of New York at Binghamton, 1988).

2. To date, only one book (*The Bahá'í Faith and Islam*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad [Ottawa: Bahá'í Studies Publications, 1990]) and perhaps ten articles have addressed the Bahá'í Faith and Islam. See bibliography in Robert Stockman and Jonah Winters, *A Resource Guide for the Scholarly Study of the Bahá'í Faith* (Wilmette, Ill.: United States Bahá'í National Center Research Office, 1997) 101–2.

3. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982) 1:37.

Bahá'u'lláh. As such, the *Íqán* fulfills several roles: it is a defense of and theological exposition on both Bábism and the Bahá'í Faith, and it serves to bridge and coordinate the two religions.

The title of *Symbol and Secret* derives from the above two considerations. First, the book examines the treatment of Islamic symbolism in the *Íqán* and explains how the *Íqán* is itself an example of Qur'anic exegesis. The *Íqán* can even be seen as residing within—though transcending and reshaping—a textual tradition of Islamic works of exegesis. Here *Symbol and Secret* is in not too unfamiliar territory, for both the Islamic exegetical tradition and Western scholarship on that tradition are coherent, respected, and active genres of scholarship. Second, *Symbol and Secret* examines the theological underpinnings of the *Íqán*: Was it written by a Bábí, or by Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest? What was the state of Bahá'u'lláh's "messianic consciousness" at the time of its writing? To what extent was Bahá'u'lláh disclosing his own secret, i.e., the fact that he himself was the promised Manifestation? Here the author is in unexplored territory for, while the nature of the Báb's evolving messianic consciousness has been explored in print, Bahá'u'lláh's own messianic consciousness has barely been addressed. Much of the book examines to what extent the *Íqán* conceals or alludes to the "secret" harbored by its author and whether it was meant to foreshadow the imminent annunciation of the secret. *Symbol and Secret* thus examines the symbol—the identity of the *Íqán* as an exploration into Qur'anic and Islamic symbolism—and it explores the secret—the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's true identity at the time. Along the way the book touches on many other, usually related, issues, such as the manuscript and publication history of the *Íqán*, *Shí'í* notions of the Mahdí, and Bahá'u'lláh's agenda of social and religious reform.

As the book sometimes lacks a sufficiently well-ordered structure (see below), its strengths can be addressed by discussing it section by section. After a somewhat meandering introduction over sixteen pages, the author launches into a critical analysis of the history of the *Íqán* in chapter one. The early history of the *Íqán* is first examined, from the date of its revelation to its dissemination, and the history of the original manuscript is discussed. Next, the author devotes nineteen pages to its publication history with a depth and assiduousness that could be regarded as a model for future textual scholarship. The author clearly conducted diligent investigative work, examining both common and obscure books and journal articles, the work of contemporary scholars and historians, comparative analysis of manuscripts, letters to and from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, and analysis of the statements of certain individuals hostile to the Bahá'í Faith, all carefully footnoted. The import of this study surpasses simply the publication history of the *Íqán*, for it touches on the dating and dissemination of other key Bahá'í texts, proposes solutions to certain historical dilemmas, and responds to critical charges made

by early opponents of the Bahá'í Faith. The diligence and concentration the author devoted to this early section offers great promise for the rest of the book to follow.

The primary focus of chapters two and three, "Exegesis and Ideology" and "Beyond Islam," is Bahá'u'lláh's tactical approach to overcoming the primary theological obstacle to post-Islamic revelation: the nature of the Qá'im, or Mahdí, and the meaning of "Seal of the Prophets," which Buck isolates as the "single verse [standing] as the most formidable doctrinal obstacle facing Bahá'u'lláh . . ." (57). *Symbol and Secret* demonstrates and explains Bahá'u'lláh's brilliant device of using theological symbols in the older scriptures against each other to reinterpret themselves, rather than negating certain statements in prior scriptures by claiming a new and higher authority. This technique allowed Bahá'u'lláh to reject the common understandings of certain key themes in prior scriptures and invest central symbols with new meaning, while retaining the authority of these texts. "With Bahá'u'lláh, the Qur'an is indeed confirmed, but relativized" (89). This chapter concludes (in a section that should perhaps belong in the next chapter) with a discussion of some technical terminology: Bahá'u'lláh's use of the terms "symbol" (*ramz*), "secret" (*sirr*), "implication" (*talwih*), and "allusion" (*ishāra*).

Chapter four, "Exegetical Techniques in the Book of Certitude," which at 123 pages occupies over one-third of *Symbol and Secret*, is the most technical and weighty section of the book. Here the author delves into the heart of his project: a demonstration that Bahá'u'lláh's agenda at this point in his mission is prosecuted through innovative Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*). Buck examines many types of exegetical innovation pioneered by Bahá'u'lláh, only a few of which will be highlighted here.

Among the innovations Bahá'u'lláh introduces into the *tafsir* tradition is "interscriptural exegesis," i.e., explaining the symbolism in the scripture of one religion through recourse to the scripture of another religion, in this case explaining the Qur'an through the New Testament. This is a type of exegesis that would not have been considered prior to the Bábí/Bahá'í religion, because traditionally Muslims regard the Bible as having been corrupted and see the Qur'an as having been sent to restore scriptural purity. To Bahá'u'lláh, though, both scriptures are authentic and hence can be used to explain each other. Using this new type of *tafsir*, Bahá'u'lláh is able gradually to lessen the obstacle to new revelation presented by "Seal of the Prophets." Another innovation is Bahá'u'lláh's extended appeal to rationality. Buck shows how the Íqán consistently points out that literal interpretations of some symbols would be pointless, of no profit to God or humankind. For example, in speaking of Qur'an 39:67, "The whole earth shall on the Resurrection Day be but His [God's] handful, and in His right hand shall the heavens be folded together," Bahá'u'lláh says: "And now, be fair in thy judgment. Were this verse to have

the meaning which men suppose it to have, of what profit, one may ask, could it be to man?" (215–16, quoting *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 47–48; cf. *Symbol* 248–51). Partly through such appeal to rationality and by exposing the absurdity of certain literalistic readings of the Qur'án, Bahá'u'lláh prepares the reader of the *Íqán* to transcend traditional interpretations and become more receptive to a new message, a new religion. A final strength of this chapter is Buck's adaptation of the *tafsír* typology elaborated by Islamicist John Wansbrough. While Wansbrough's work is not without its detractors—a common complaint being that it is little more than Orientalist reductionism⁴—Buck's application of his hermeneutical typology to the *Íqán* is highly instructive. Wansbrough adduces twelve exegetical techniques used in traditional *tafsír*, such as "variant readings," "proof texts," "grammatical explanation," "rhetorical explanation," and "analogy." Buck finds ten of Wansbrough's twelve techniques in the *Íqán* and discusses each in turn, usually providing and analyzing examples from the text. This section is among the most focused examinations of Bahá'í scripture published in English and, even if a reader might disagree with some of Buck's analyses, the endeavor itself is to be applauded.

• *Symbol and Secret's* conclusion, "The Other Side of the Bridge," uses the above discussions of Islamic context and content in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and his reinterpretations of Qur'anic symbolism to extrapolate into the realm of Bahá'í theology. Here, the book examines the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's exegetically founded break from Islam for issues such as post-Qur'anic revelation, religious and social reform, rational versus metaphorical approaches to scripture, the Bábí reception of the *Íqán*, and Bahá'u'lláh's "messianic consciousness." This chapter contains some of the most enlightening and useful discussions in the book and quite successfully conveys the sense of urgency and potency infusing the *Íqán* and the state of the early Bahá'í community.

As the above discussion has been somewhat technical, there is danger of the forest being lost for the trees; the innovativeness and relevance of Buck's work must be reemphasized. The Bahá'í writings can in large part only be understood when the literary, cultural, and theological traditions from which they sprang are examined, and the influences of one are traced through the other. Familiarity with the Islamic and Persian contexts is crucial for two reasons: one, Bahá'u'lláh reflects it; two, Bahá'u'lláh builds upon it. When an Islamic or Persian symbol, metaphor, or teaching is reflected in a later Bahá'í one, an understanding of the former is a clear prerequisite for a full understanding of the latter. Conversely, when Bahá'u'lláh modified, built upon, or reinterpreted familiar symbols and teachings, an understanding of their old meanings is a prerequisite for an understanding of how Bahá'u'lláh built new ones. As *Symbol*

4. See, for example, apologist Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'án* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994) xiii–xiv.

and *Secret* is the first work written in English to examine Bahá'í scripture and hermeneutics in any analytical depth, Buck's work can without exaggeration be declared groundbreaking.

Given the importance of the topics addressed and the skill with which they are examined, it is regrettable that some readers might find *Symbol and Secret* impenetrable. There are two main obstacles in approaching this work: the opacity of the author's prose, and the occasional disorderliness of the book's content. These problems permeate the book, but a detailed accounting would serve only to harp on them. Therefore, only a few examples will be given.

The difficulty of the author's prose is perhaps the more superficial of these two criticisms and will be addressed first. This can be isolated into two main criticisms: an infelicitous mixture of the poetic and the academic, and the author's predilection for lengthy words and disjointed paragraphs.

The author has striven here to maintain a balance between the academic and the confessional, between an approach rooted in objective impartiality versus one rooted in faith-based apologetics. Since scholars of religion in general, and Bahá'í scholars in particular, are often called upon to strike such a balance, Buck's attempt is to be defended in principle. Did Muhammad "write" the Qur'án, or did God "reveal it through him"? Did Bahá'u'lláh gradually "become aware of his messianic consciousness," or did he carefully plan the gradual revelation of a mission of which he himself had been fully aware since 1853? The author has succeeded well at balancing on this particular fine line, for he has written a lengthy, objective work thick with obscure technical jargon which yet manages to convey a warm sense of commitment to and respect for his field of inquiry, often lacking in scholarly books on religion.

However, whether due to his personal writing style or as a conscious literary device, his writing can in places read as an unsuccessful juxtaposition of poetic and academic styles. For example, his extended analogy of "fleshing" symbols on page 92 does add color to his presentation, but it is a color that clashes. The author displays a fondness for polysyllabic alliteration, as in "pestilential pit" (xxx), "artifice of ambivalence" (6), "vituperative vaticination" (84), "arcanelly augured" (86), or "extraordinary extemporaneity" (294). With shorter words, or less obscure ones, such a device can nicely spice up any prose. In this book, however, they might serve only to bog down the readers or, worse, bemuse them. As well, the author sometimes fails to remember that clarity is more important than technicality. Why "variae lectiones" (139) when "variant readings" carries exactly the same meaning? Why "loci probantes" (141), a phrase not even found in most collegiate dictionaries, when "proof-texts" is a common and equivalent phrase?⁵ Finally, some of the writing suffers from

5. Or, as Hans Wehr translates the term in question, *shawáhid*, "quotation[s] serving as textual evidence" (Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary* [Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1976], s.v. "shahid").

prolixity. For example, Buck states that "Shoghi Effendi . . . provides a periphrastic rendering of the verse in translation" (176), which could equally be rendered as "Shoghi Effendi . . . paraphrases the verse." ("To paraphrase" is to express the meaning of a phrase by many words instead of by few.)

A more problematic aspect of *Symbol and Secret* is its somewhat chaotic form. It lacks coherence both in formatting and in content; internal evidence could give the impression that it was composed in numerous parts, which were then combined into a somewhat haphazard whole for publication. Formatting inconsistencies include the appearance of words, such as "*tafsír*" appearing both in italics and in roman type on the same page (84) and the use of diacritics, such as "Qur'an" and "Qur'án" appearing on the same page (129) or even in the same sentence (130). Such inconsistency is no more than an occasional distraction, but it does indicate editing lapses—as do the few dozen typographical errors occurring throughout the book.

Inconsistent treatments of citations also indicate insufficient editing. Many authorities are cited just by last name, e.g., "According to McAuliffe" (82) versus "by Irish Islamicist Denis MacEoin" (xxii). Identifying MacEoin as an "Irish Islamicist" does not impart any significant meaning that is lacking in not identifying McAuliffe, but the implication given is that the reader is expected to recognize the unidentified names. Conversely, some authorities are identified repeatedly, e.g., "Sa'd al-Dín al-Taftázání (d. 1389 or 1390 C.E.)" (91), "the authoritative rhetorician al-Taftázání" (161), and "al-Taftázání (d. 1389 C.E.)" (252). Foreign words can also be inconsistently defined: e.g., "*imámí akhbár*" is first used on page 128 but not defined until page 132, while "*Akhabári*" had been defined on page 127. This interrupts the reader's concentration as he or she skims forward and backward trying to find out what he or she missed. These and other similar examples—such as works cited in the footnotes but missing from the bibliography, or footnotes missing from the text—indicate that the text might not have been written systematically and was not edited sufficiently closely.

Were such inconsistencies confined to the technical sphere, the above would be simple nitpicking, but the content of the text can also be disorderly. The numerous sections are formatted as if belonging in the same hierarchical level—they are distinguished usually by headings in capital letters—when their content is actually of varying levels. For example, "Wansbrough's *Tafsír* Typology" (134), "Procedural Devices in the Book of Certitude" (136) and "Variae Lectiones" (139) are three sequential sections, each one seemingly a subsection of the previous, but are formatted with identical headings. At a minimum, the presentation of the twelve devices, each one granted its own section, should have been numbered. As some chapters have up to a dozen such sections, and chapter four has twenty-two, the reader can quickly become lost.

The topics examined in the text can be jumbled, with unrelated sentences,

paragraphs, and whole sections inserted in the middle of otherwise coherent presentations. For example, the short paragraphs on Bábí messianic fervor on pages 110–11 seem to bear little relation either to the definition of *tafsír* immediately preceding them or to the paragraphs on New Testament apocalyptic immediately following. Conversely, topics that should be presented coherently can be found scattered throughout the book. For example, the issue of Bahá'u'lláh's messianic secret, which the title of the book implies is one-half of the book's content, is picked up and then dropped in ten places, none of which represents a single, unified treatment. The author appears to discuss and settle the question on pages 64–73, where he examines Bahá'u'lláh's self-consciousness, Bábí messianic expectations, and the techniques Bahá'u'lláh used both to hide and to reveal his "secret." When all of the same topics are then addressed on pages 257–75, albeit in greater detail, one wonders why the two sections are half a book apart. One further wonders what organization guided the layout of *Symbol and Secret* when the book ends, not with a tight summary of ground covered, but with a discussion of Bahá'u'lláh's agenda of socioreligious reform, which does not seem to bear direct relevance to the preceding book and reads more as the introduction to a new, unrelated book. It is curious that, though admitting that this section is "outside the scope of this study" (282), the author devotes ten pages to it.

Given the number of topics covered and the somewhat random way in which they are treated, the book should have a more detailed table of contents and an index; in the age of computerized wordprocessing where a minimal index can be created in a day, the lack of one is inexcusable and hampers the book's utility as a resource tool.

The above criticisms of the book are offered, not in the spirit of complaint, but in regret that such a valuable work as *Symbol and Secret* is marred by flaws as soluble as reordering, more careful writing, and further editing. The author has undertaken a project that is to be commended on many fronts. First, this study is daring in that it is the first extended analysis of the Islamic context and content of Bahá'u'lláh's thought and writings. Buck's tangential self-defense on pages 260–61 indicates that he, too, is well aware of the daringness of the topic and of his academic approach to it. Second, the rigor with which he has treated his topics is a model for anyone engaging in textual scholarship: his research is broad, his attention to detail thorough, and his coverage of the topics exhaustive. Finally, many of his conclusions, the light he throws on the *Íqán* and its content, and, in places, even his methods are frankly brilliant. Though the potential reader must be cautioned that *Symbol and Secret* can be a frustrating and opaque text that is difficult to penetrate, it is a phenomenal study which will well repay the diligent reader.