



***In the Clouds
of Glory***

In the Clouds of Glory

Volume V

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www.GlobalPerspective.org

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In the Clouds of Glory

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Other Volumes:

Volume I: I Shall Come Again (in print)

Volume II: Lord of Lords (in print)

Volume III: King of Kings (in print)



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Introduction

Promises Made

All the Scriptures proclaim and predict the Advent of a supreme Savior and Redeemer, the dawning of a great Light-Bringer who rises in the midst of darkness and despair, ushering in a new Day of Light and Hope in the Spiritual destiny of mankind; a Savior about whose Advent God has made a Covenant with every one of His past Messengers; a Redeemer called the Spirit of Truth, the King of Glory, the Lord of Hosts, Christ come in the Glory of His Father, the Glory of God; a Divine Educator destined to begin a new Cycle in the Spiritual fortunes of mankind, to inaugurate an Era of enduring peace and prosperity, an Epoch of righteousness and justice, an Age of light and hope never obscured by darkness or despair:

The sound of violence shall be heard no longer in your land, or ruin and devastation within your borders; but you shall call your walls Deliverance and your gates Praise. The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor the moon shine on you when evening falls; the Lord shall be your everlasting light, your God shall be your glory. Never again shall your sun set nor your moon withdraw her light; but the Lord shall be your everlasting light and the days of your mourning shall be ended. Isaiah 60:18-20 NEB*

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see him face to face, and bear his name on their foreheads. There shall be no more night,

* To enhance clarity, two modern translations of the Scriptures are used: The New English Bible, identified by NEB, and The New International Version, identified by NIV. For passages from King James Version, no identifying letters have been used.

nor will they need the light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will give them light; and they shall reign for evermore.

Revelation 22:3-5 NEB

And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts...The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts.

Haggai 2:7-9

Promises Fulfilled

Over a century ago (1844), a young Man named the Báb (The Gate), heralded the dawning of this glorious Day:

Assuredly we are today living in the Days of God. These are the glorious days on the like of which the sun hath never risen in the past. These are the days which the people in bygone times eagerly expected. What hath then befallen you that ye are fast asleep? These are the days wherein God hath caused the Day-Star of Truth to shine resplendent. What hath then caused you to keep your silence? These are the appointed days which ye have been yearningly awaiting in the past—the days of the advent of divine justice. Render ye thanks unto God, O ye concourse of believers.¹

The Báb's Message of Hope and Peace met with rejection, persecution, and at last the execution of the Messenger Himself before thousands of spectators.

During His brief Ministry, the Báb foretold again and again the imminent dawning of another Divine Teacher, greater than Himself. He said that He had come simply to prepare the way for His coming, and that His dearest wish was to lay down His life for this great Messenger, whom He called by many titles, among them "Remnant of God:"

O Thou Remnant of God! I have sacrificed myself wholly for Thee; I have accepted curses for Thy sake, and have yearned for naught but martyrdom in the path of Thy love. Sufficient witness

unto me is God, the Exalted, the Protector, the Ancient of Days.²

About nineteen years after the advent of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh (the Glory of God) declared Himself the One not only foretold by the Báb but by all the great Manifestations* since the Dawn of History. Here is how Bahá'u'lláh describes, in a prayer, His spiritual transformation by the Divine Power:

I lay asleep on my couch, O my God, when lo, the gentle winds of Thy grace and Thy loving-kindness passed over me, and wakened me through the power of Thy sovereignty and Thy gifts, and bade me arise before Thy servants, and speak forth Thy praise, and glorify Thy word...

...Every time I hold my peace, and cease to extol Thy wondrous virtues, Thy Spirit impelleth me to cry out before all who are in Thy heaven and on Thy earth; and every time I am still, the breaths wafted from the right hand of Thy will and purpose pass over me, and stir me up, and I find myself to be as a leaf which lieth at the mercy of the winds of Thy decree, and is carried away whithersoever Thou dost permit or command it. Every man of insight who considereth what hath been revealed by me, will be persuaded that Thy Cause is not in my hands, but in Thy hands, and will recognize that the reins of power are held not in my grasp but in Thy grasp, and are subject to Thy sovereign might. And yet, Thou seest, O my God, how the inhabitants of Thy realm have arrayed themselves against me, and inflict upon me every moment of my life what causeth the realities of Thy chosen ones and trusted ones to tremble.³

During His long Ministry, which lasted nearly forty years, Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His Mission in hundreds of "Tablets" (Letters) addressed to mankind, to political and religious leaders, and to the ruling sovereigns of His Day. Let us review a brief passage addressed to all mankind:

...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

* The words Savior, Redeemer, Messenger, Teacher, Revelator, and Manifestation (of God) are used synonymously.

fulfilled! This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: “Ye cannot bear it now.” And when the appointed time was fulfilled and the Hour had 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. The Hour which We had concealed from the knowledge of the peoples of the earth and of the favored angels hath come to pass.⁴

Bahá'u'lláh's Message of hope and fulfillment, like that of the Báb, met with rejection, and He Himself with severe persecution, imprisonment, and exile. Yet in spite of relentless hardships, Bahá'u'lláh remained steadfast in His Claim. In fact suffering simply enchanted and inflamed His Spirit. He always referred to them with great pride and honor, regarding them as Gifts from God:

I sorrow not for the burden of My imprisonment. Neither do I grieve over My abasement, or the tribulation I suffer at the hands of Mine enemies. By My life! They are My glory, a glory where-with God hath adorned His own Self. Would that ye know it!

The shame I was made to bear hath uncovered the glory with which the whole of creation had been invested, and through the cruelties I have endured, the Day Star of Justice hath manifested itself, and shed its splendor upon men.⁵

Truth Stands Distinct and Distinguished

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh proclaim their Message in the most emphatic terms, declaring that the proofs of their Claim are too evident to be denied and too conspicuous to be disregarded or ignored:

I testify, O my God, that this is the Day whereon Thy testimony hath been fulfilled, and Thy clear tokens have been manifested, and Thine utterances have been revealed, and Thy signs have

been demonstrated, and the radiance of Thy countenance hath been diffused, and Thy proof hath been perfected, and Thine ascendancy hath been established, and Thy mercy hath overflowed, and the Day-Star of Thy grace hath shone forth with such brilliance that Thou didst manifest Him Who is the Revealer of Thyself and the Treasury of Thy wisdom and the Dawning-Place of Thy majesty and power. Thou didst establish His covenant with every one who hath been created in the kingdoms of earth and heaven and in the realms of revelation and of creation.⁶ Bahá'u'lláh

Do the Claims of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh withstand the test of reason? Do they fulfill the promise of the Scriptures? Can the seekers of truth find convincing and undeniable proofs of the validity of their words? It is my intent to share with you in this book the principal proofs I have discovered during my long search, extending over the span of fourteen years and covering thousands of hours of research, writing, editing, rewriting, meditating, and praying. I shall attempt to show you step by step the main stages of my own search during this long and wondrous journey. The evidence will be presented as objectively as is possible. You need to examine it with an open and searching mind and judge for yourself.

If you do your share, namely pursue your search with unswerving devotion, you will find the judging quite simple, for the evidence is overwhelming. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

O ye that judge with fairness! If this Cause is to be denied then what other cause in this world can be vindicated or deemed worthy of acceptance?⁷

And again:

This Cause is too evident to be obscured, and too conspicuous to be concealed. It shineth as the sun in its meridian glory.⁸

The Báb declares the same truth:

Truth can in no wise be confounded with aught else except itself; would that ye might ponder His proof. Nor can error be

confused with Truth, if ye do but reflect upon the testimony of God, the True One.⁹

When we compare the works of men, we often find it difficult to distinguish one from the other, for all humans function on the same level—the human level. But comparing God’s Work with man’s work—that is something else. There stands no relationship between the two. One shines, as Bahá’u’lláh declares, “as the sun in its meridian glory,” the other, we might add, as a candle flickering in the distant dark.

The task of distinguishing the Divine Truth is indeed quite simple, for we are not called upon to differentiate between many fine points deceptively similar. For there is no Divine Messenger who is half true, a little better, or more true. And there is no imposter who is partially divine, partially deceptive. Any one laying claim to Divine Revelation is utterly true or else utterly false, is either divine or deceptive. As seekers of truth, we are not presented with a multiple-choice question with many similar alternatives, but one with only two distinct and easily separable alternatives: true, or false.

Reason and Revelation Combined

The approach followed throughout the book, particularly in relation to proofs, is to present the evidence first on purely logical grounds and then further reinforce and sustain it by offering the relevant prophetic references, drawn primarily from the Scriptures. Thus if you wish to view religion from a purely rational perspective, you will find an overwhelming array of evidence with which to test the Divine Message. Similarly, if you prefer a scriptural approach to revelation, you will find not only rational but prophetic proofs as well. You will note further that the two methods, or sets of evidence, harmonize with marvelous precision, that revelation and reason share a common core and enjoy an intimate and essential relationship, based on a single system of unified and universal laws or principles.

Contrary to the common trend in treating religious themes, the facts of this book do not rest on assumptions or supposition; reliable and irrefutable evidence stands behind the whole Message. At no time will you be asked to accept anything on faith. On the contrary, you will be constantly encouraged to apply and expect the most rigorous standards of reasoning.

A Stone that Causes Men to Stumble (Romans 9:33 NIV)

We stand on the threshold of a new and enchanting journey, one which can carry us from the familiar realms of tradition and convention to the unknown and unfamiliar frontier of the search for truth. For some, the preparation for the new Journey may prove quite trying, for it will put many of their traditional beliefs to the test; for others, namely those who marvel at the challenge of the new knowledge, the preparation will prove quite simple, in fact, enchanting. But no matter how great the required efforts, the rewards are always greater:

Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. Revelation 3:12

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. Revelation 21:7

The Book of Revelation is about our time and the words are addressed to us. We are repeatedly asked to overcome. Overcome what? Overcome whatever obscures the truth, whatever stands between us and the Splendors of Divine Glory: egotism, apathy, literal-mindedness, fear, lack of self-trust, materialism, dogmatism, complacency, conformity, bias, selfish motives, self-righteousness, lack of sensitivity, lack of trust in God, lack of persistence, lack of courage. Any of these alone can obscure the truth, can become the “stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall”

(Rom. 9:33 NIV). If some or all of them join, their stumbling power becomes awesome.

Before the seed is sown, the soil must be prepared—the weeds uprooted, the rocks removed, the hard clay made soft, nourishment added, the parched land watered. To show that the Seed of Faith can grow only in a receptive or prepared heart, Jesus used the following parable:

The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they cannot believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Luke 8:11-15 NIV

The Message of this Volume

This volume represents the fifth stage of our search into the claim of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Although it can and does serve as proof, its chief function is to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of proofs, to disperse the clouds of misconceptions that obscure the light of truth, the misjudgments that prevent the seekers from ever considering the proofs. Specifically, it seeks to decode the language of Scriptural symbolism on the return of Jesus, to explore the mystic or metaphorical expressions of the Scriptures and to offer examples indicating the inadequacies of literal interpretation, to demonstrate how the symbolic words have always stood as obstacles in the path of the search for Truth, depriving the masses of mankind from recognizing the Divine Messengers, how the seekers have always been disappointed by not finding spectacular displays of pomp and power from their expected Redeemer, why symbols have been used, how they have served as a means of

testing the seekers of truth, separating the open-minded from the closed-minded, why a Savior should never be judged by the human standards but by the Divine Standards clearly established in all the Scriptures, why the interpretation of symbols should be left exclusively to the Redeemer of the Age, how a seeker may separate the symbolic from the literal, and why he should never expect the literal fulfillment of metaphors used to convey spiritual truths.

If you feel questions such as “Jesus shall come over the clouds,” or “every eye shall see Him,” or “at His coming the dead must rise,” have only symbolic significance, you may not need to examine this volume. It may be most suitable for you to go directly to the third volume, which is primarily an extension of the first.

To Conclude

The Claim made by Bahá'u'lláh is awesome, and so are the rewards and punishments—rewards for those who seek and punishment for those who refuse to seek. God never wishes us to accept anything on blind faith, without finding it perfectly reasonable. It would be against His Justice to expect anyone to acknowledge something that is less than convincing. But He can—and He does—except one thing: to obey His binding Commandment to search. Searching is neither accepting nor rejecting. It is a sign of being open-minded; it is a voice from within declaring: “I am hungry for Truth and wish to satisfy the hunger. If God has sent a Messenger, this is undoubtedly the greatest event in human history. I wish to be absolutely sure I won't miss Him. I am willing to follow every evidence, every lead, until I find Him either right or wrong, a Divine Teacher or a deceiver. I do not wish to be among those who neither see the Redeemer nor know Him.”

Searching in nor way indicates disloyalty to ones beliefs. In fact it proves just the opposite, for as mentioned, the proof of knowing and loving ones Savior is obeying His Commandments, among them the commandment to seek.

To be just in our judgment, we should intend neither to accept nor to reject the Message. Our task is simply to look at the evidence, and then walk in whichever direction it may lead us.

No one has the right to impose his beliefs on us. We are the master of our own destiny and accountable to our Creator for honoring or dishonoring His Commandment. Neither our parents, nor our pastor, nor our peers can assume or carry for us the share of accountability that is specifically assigned to us.

As we tread the path of the search for truth, we should not allow the new Name to veil our vision, to stand between us and our responsibility to seek and to search. We should also not assume that the nontraditional or the unfamiliar has to be wrong. When God creates something new, He gives it a new Name. It is indeed His firm testament to make all things new.

Further, we should not allow our preoccupation with the world to prevent us from Him who made the world, nor allow our concern for time to deprive us from the purpose for which both we and time were made. The earthly life is but a brief moment—yet an infinitely vital one. For it lays the foundation for all our future in all the worlds to come. We should not let this moment pass without having fulfilled our Divine Destiny, without having prepared our souls for the next stage of our journey.

Still further, we should not allow excessive fear of falsehood to paralyze our conscience, to dim our courage, to diminish our love for truth. We can overcome our fear by fully trusting in God, by putting our whole faith in Him who promised to guide all those who seek Him sincerely, with their whole heart, all those who conform to the Law of the Lord and not to the prevailing mood of the time.

God is never unjust to man, expecting him to act against his nature, or wishing him to believe beyond his reason. In His boundless Wisdom and unfailing Love, He paves the Path and posts the guiding Lights in ways that no one who keeps his eyes open can ever falter or fail to find the Way. For the Divine Shepherd assures us saying:

For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.

Matthew 11:30

And again:

...his commands are not burdensome...

I John 5:3 NIV

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God. How could He, otherwise, have fulfilled His testimony unto men, if ye be of them that ponder His Cause in their hearts. He will never deal unjustly with any one, neither will He task a soul beyond its power. He, verily, is the Compassionate, the All-Merciful.¹⁰

If we do not begin with confidence in our own ability to find the truth, there is little hope we will ever find it.

It is we who are affected by obeying or disobeying the Divine Commandments. God is not in need of our loyalty or obedience. In the words of the Báb:

By God! If ye do well, to your own behoof will ye do well; and if ye deny God and His signs, We, in very truth, having God, can well dispense with all creatures and all earthly dominion.¹¹

And in the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Consider the mercy of God and His gifts. He enjoineth upon you that which shall profit you, though He Himself can well dispense with all creatures. Your evil doings can never harm Us, neither can your good works profit Us. We summon you wholly for the sake of God. To this every man of understanding and insight will testify.¹²

Christ expressed the same truth when He said:

...if my disciples keep silence the stones will shout aloud.

Luke 19:40 NEB

If we refuse to search, we simply deprive ourselves, for the rewards always depend on the endeavors; “A man reaps what he sows” (Gal. 6:7 NIV).

If we sow obedience to Divine Commandment we will reap the Divine Pleasure, otherwise we stand accountable before Him eternally for our failure to seek and to search. Here are the words of the Scriptures and the Qur'án as well as those of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, all attesting to the accountability or responsibility of every soul before God:

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Romans 14:12

Surely, therefore, will we call those to account, to whom an Apostle [Messenger] hath been sent...

Qur'án 7:5

I tell you this: there is not a thoughtless word that comes from men's lips but they will have to account for it on the day of judgment.

Matthew 12:36 NEB

Thus on the Day of Resurrection God will ask everyone of his understanding and not of his following in the footsteps of others. How often a person, having inclined his ears to the holy verses, would bow down in humility and would embrace the Truth, while his leader would not do so. Thus every individual must bear his own responsibility, rather than someone else bearing it for him.¹³

The Báb

Ye shall follow in their wake, and shall be made to enter a habitation wherein none shall be found to befriend or help you. Ye shall, of a truth, be asked of your doings, shall be called to account for your failure in duty with regard to the Cause of God, and for having disdainfully rejected His loved ones who, with manifest sincerity, have come unto you.¹⁴

Bahá'u'lláh

...I have perfected in every one of you My creation, so that the excellence of My handiwork may be fully revealed unto men. It follows, therefore, that every man hath been, and will continue to be, able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified. Had he not been endowed with such a capacity, how could he be called to account for his failure? If, in the Day when all the peoples of the earth will be gathered together, any man should, whilst standing in the presence of God, be asked: "Wherefore hast thou disbelieved in My Beauty and turned away from My Self," and if such a man should reply and say: "Inasmuch as all men have erred, and none hath been found willing to turn his face to the Truth, I, too, following their example, have grievously failed to recognize the Beauty of the Eternal," such a plea will, assuredly, be rejected. For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself.¹⁵

Bahá'u'lláh

Part I

Learning from the Examples of History

A point of emphasis throughout *The Book of Certitude* is to draw our attention to the past, to encourage us to learn from the example of those who have been in our place before. For once again we stand on the threshold of a new journey from the confines of self-knowledge to the boundless domains of divine-Knowledge. We need to study the ways of those who have come and gone before us, to learn from their experience, their successes and failures. As it is said: “Those who don’t learn from their past mistakes are doomed to repeat them.”

I

Why Was Jesus Rejected?

The Consequences of Misunderstanding Symbolic Words

The misunderstanding of symbolic words has played a decisive role in the destiny of humankind. Basically it has given rise to three dilemmas, each of grave consequences, and each intensely devastating to human destiny. First, divergent and conflicting views of the Scriptures have caused deep divisions within the ranks of the faithful. The divine gift of unity has thus been altered, shaped and reshaped into multitudes of conflicting forms and images; instead of unifying it has divided, instead of befriending it has estranged and alienated.

Second, the literal interpretation of symbols has caused religion to appear illogical, unscientific, and perhaps antiscientific. This is quite unfortunate, for the pure essence of religion, as demonstrated in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, stands in perfect harmony with science and reason. It is because of misunderstanding of God's Words—particularly those uttered through symbolism—that the two most harmonious and complementary forces in society (science and religion) appear so often contradictory and at odds.

Third, failure to comprehend the inner meaning of prophetic Words has resulted in the denial of every divine Teacher or Savior the world

has ever known.* What seems most astounding and incredible is that the people have repeated the same misjudgments again and again at the time of the advent of every Messenger, without ever coming to terms with reality.

The spiritual history of humankind testifies that soon following the onset of every dispensation, divergent and conflicting views and creeds—especially in relation to symbolism—begin to arise, to accumulate, to multiply, and to be passed from generation to generation until the approach of the dawn of the next Light Bringer. At such a critical juncture, these misconceptions appear like thick clouds, over the heaven of the previous Revelation, obscuring its radiance from the eyes of people.

Then at a time when the Cycle of Faith has reached its darkest point, the divine Wisdom demands that a new Light Bringer appear over these clouds, riding them for a while and then dispelling them with His divine radiance.

Dispelling such clouds, however, is not an easy task; it may be the greatest challenge the divine Messengers have to face.

The Clouds of Misjudgment Obscuring the Light of Jesus

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. Christ (John 8:43 NIV)

The brilliant light shining from Jesus, “the light of the world” (John 9:5), could in no way disperse or diminish the gloomy clouds engulfing the Jews at the time of Jesus. They raised petty objections to His interpretations and refused for the most part to recognize the “wisdom” of His sayings, “for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (I Cor. 2:8). Christ’s response to the objections raised by those mindful of the letter of the law, but forgetful of its spirit, was that only He had the

* For a brief review of the life of God’s great Messengers and their suffering at the hands of the people, see *The Book of Certitude*, pp. 4-19.

key to divine mysteries, only He knew the right interpretation, because it was only He who had been endowed with divine knowledge.

“The Breaking” of the Sabbath

The Pharisees saw Jesus “break” their holy Sabbath again and again. “How does a Savior who comes to fulfill the Law, break the Law?” they wondered. What did they hear in response to their wonderment? Simply that:

The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Luke 6:5 NIV

For the Son of Man is sovereign over the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:8 NEB

But they insisted that:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

Isaiah 40:8 NIV

See also I Peter 1:24-25

Had those denying Jesus (instead of bickering with Him over His interpretation of the Law and the symbolic sayings), pondered the proofs of His Mission—His wondrous fruits, His words of wisdom, His devotion to truth, His knowledge of the things to come, and His supreme love—and tried to understand the wisdom of His sayings (“Why do ye not understand my speech?”), they would have instantly recognized Him. But alas, they preferred to argue with the supreme Interpreter over a few small, nonessential matters all based on their misunderstanding of the spirit of the Scriptures. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “The letter they knew by heart, but of the life-giving spirit they understood not a word.”¹

They expected the literal fulfillment of all the prophecies exactly according to their own interpretations. They had hoped for spectacular events to occur prior to and during the advent of their expected Savior. They found all these prophecies unfulfilled.

The Descent of Elijah from Heaven

The prophecies indicated that the advent of Elijah must precede that of the Messiah. But where was Elijah? He had ascended to heaven:

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more.

II Kings 2:11-12 NIV

And where could Elijah come from but heaven? Jesus told the objectors that John the Baptist was the return of Elijah:

...and John is the destined Elijah, if you will but accept it. If you have ears, then hear.*

Matthew 11:15 NEB

And again:

The disciples put a question to him: ‘Why then do our teachers say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Yes, Elijah will come and set everything right. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they failed to recognize him, and worked their will upon him; and in the same way the Son of Man is to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he meant John the Baptist.

Matthew 17:10-13 NEB

See also Mark 9:11-13

But how could it be? John the Baptist had not descended from heaven; he had been born like everyone else. And he had never been called Elijah. And above all, he himself had denied being Elijah:

“Are you Elijah?” “No,” he replied.

John 1:21 NEB

* Sometimes when Christ expressed a spiritual truth that required a pure and sensitive perception, He completed His theme with words such as: “If you have ears, then hear.”

Although unacceptable to the Jews, the prophecy of the coming of Elijah had indeed been fulfilled. For John the Baptist had in truth come from heaven, but only in spirit, and he had manifested the spiritual powers of Elijah:

He will go before him [Jesus] as forerunner, possessed by the spirit and power of Elijah... Luke 1:17 NEB

The Bahá'í scriptures indicate that whenever the divine Messengers speak of “return,” they mean the return or resurrection of the spiritual or divine power manifested in them. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Therefore, those who in every subsequent Dispensation preceded the rest of mankind in embracing the Faith of God, who quaffed the clear waters of knowledge at the hand of the divine Beauty, and attained the loftiest summits of faith and certitude, these can be regarded, in name, in reality, in deeds, in words, and in rank, as the “return” of those who in a former Dispensation had achieved similar distinctions. For whatsoever the people of a former Dispensation have manifested, the same hath been shown by the people of this latter generation. Consider the rose: whether it blossometh in the East or in the West, it is none the less a rose. For what mattereth in this respect is not the outward shape and form of the rose, but rather the smell and fragrance which it doth impart.²

The descent of Elijah from heaven was only a prelude to another descent, one of even greater magnitude: the coming of the supreme Redeemer and Savior from an unknown place.

The Coming of the Messiah from an Unknown Place

The Jews found still other promises regarding their Savior unfulfilled. For it was their firm belief that “when the Messiah appears no one is to know where he comes from” (John 7:27 NEB).

And how could Nazareth, a place they knew too well, be qualified as the unknown or mystical home of their expected Messenger?

“...can anything good come from Nazareth?” (John 1:46 NEB), they wondered. How did Jesus respond to their objections? Simply that:

No doubt you know me; no doubt you know where I come from. Yet I have not come of my own accord. I was sent by the One who truly is, and him you do not know... John 7:28 NEB

Open-Mindedness the Key to Understanding

Translating the symbolic signs into their intended meanings, as done by Jesus, is quite reasonable, provided—and this is an essential precondition—the seeker strives to perceive the truth with a fresh outlook, to set his soul free from the bonds of conformity and servitude to his long-cherished beliefs, dogmas, and creeds, mainly rooted in tradition and solidified and idolized through centuries of repetition and reinforcement.

Let us consider a few questions.

What was the *real* Elijah? His body or his spirit? And what was the *real* Jesus? His body or His spirit? If “God is spirit” (John 4:24), could Christ be anything else? We know too well that “the spirit alone gives life; the flesh is of no avail” (John 6:63). We are also told: “Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28 NEB). The rational, thinking, willing, conscious element of a human being is his soul, not his body. The body turns to dust, the spirit returns to God. “We are from God, and unto Him do we return,” is a fact attested in all the Scriptures. It is the spirit which inherits the kingdom of God, “...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...” (I Cor. 15:50).

Every spirit originates with God, the unknowable, the placeless. Every spirit comes from an unknown place. Both Jesus and John the Baptist came from the same source. When John the Baptist said he was not Elijah, he spoke the truth, for he was a new creation. When Jesus said John the Baptist *was* Elijah, He also spoke the truth, for John manifested the spiritual powers of Elijah.

The literal-minded refuse to set the letter free, because they fail to grasp the spirit. They want the same Elijah dwelling in the same old body, and they want their Savior to descend upon them miraculously. Spirit does not quench their thirst for the tangible, it is too abstract and ethereal. They want something earthshaking to astonish them and shake them into belief.

The Feeding of Wolf and Lamb Together

The Jews of the time of Jesus were faced as yet with other unfulfilled prophecies—prophecies they had adored and exalted for centuries. They had hoped that during the reign of their Messiah, the wolf and the lamb would feed together (Isa. 65:25). What a test it must have been for the Jews to hear Jesus, their expected Messiah, proclaim:

Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed,
I have come to bring division. Luke 12:51-52 NEB

They encountered the exact opposite of what they expected. First, they had to learn that the prophecy was symbolic. That is, by “lamb and wolf” is meant antagonistic peoples; and second, that for the present and *immediate* future they could not see even the symbolic fulfillment of the prophecy (namely harmony between the peoples). For the present, they could see only division. Harmony would come decades, or even centuries, later. What an awesome test!

Yes, Jesus said He had come to divide family members (Matt. 10:35). But we should remember that ultimately the families He joined by far outnumbered those He divided. He broke up many families to begin with, but ultimately He blended many millions, some as antagonistic as “the wolf and the lamb.”

There are those in our age who still expect the literal fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Bahá’u’lláh writes:

This is the significance of the well-known words: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” Behold the ignorance and folly of

those who, like the nations of old, are still expecting to witness the time when these beasts will feed together in one pasture!³

Altering Still Other Laws of Moses

The Jews were faced with still other problems. They noted that in addition to changing their holy Sabbath, Jesus was breaking or relaxing other laws as well. “A tooth for a tooth,” and “an eye for an eye” were replaced by forgiveness; divorce was abrogated, impure foods regarded as pure (Mark 7:15-19). How could a God-sent Savior alter God-sent Laws? How could the words of the prophet Isaiah prove wrong? For he had declared:

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God
shall stand for ever. Isaiah 40:8

The words of Isaiah would not prove wrong, only the literal interpretation of the literal-minded. For the divine teachings are of two kinds: essential, and nonessential. The essential teachings include moral-spiritual values, such as love and charity and honesty. These never change; they stand as enduring as God Himself, for they constitute His own attributes reflected in the world of creation. The nonessential teachings include practices that must adapt to the changing times, practices such as laws of eating, marrying, divorcing, or punishing; rituals such as sacrificing animals or baptizing humans; festivals such as the observing of special holidays or days of rest; and finally ways of worshipping, praying, and fasting. These practices do not relate to the inner essence of man, which is the reflection of God Himself, but to a changing and evolving world.

To Conclude

Is it difficult to accept such explanations? It all depends on one’s purity and wholeness (seeing the whole picture) of perception. These questions constituted a real test for the Jews. The light of their Redeemer was beclouded in many ways:

- The coming of their Savior had not been heralded by the heavenly descent of their prophet Elijah.
- Their Savior had appeared in the form of a mortal man, subject to all physical needs or weaknesses, such as poverty, illness, sleep, eating and drinking.
- He had not come from an unknown place.
- He had failed to fulfill some of the prophecies literally, saying that they were symbolic.
- He had postponed the fulfillment of certain expected events.
- He had altered some of the laws and rituals to which the Jews were dearly attached.*

Most of the examples cited (“the return of Elijah with a new identity,” “the feeding of lamb and wolf together,” and “the coming of the Savior from an unknown place”) carry some degree of symbolism. And these, along with other prophetic symbols, accomplished the purpose for which they had been spoken: namely to separate the literal-minded from the liberal-minded. Bahá’u’lláh declares:

Those words, sharp as the sword of God, have separated the faithful from the infidel, and severed father from son...How many fathers have turned away from their sons; how many lovers have shunned their beloved! So mercilessly trenchant was this wondrous sword of God that it cleft asunder every relationship!⁴

But as they separated, they also welded and united:

On the other hand, consider the welding power of His Word. Observe, how those in whose midst the Satan of self had for years sown the seeds of malice and hate became so fused and blended through their allegiance to this wondrous and transcendent Revelation that it seemed as if they had sprung from the same loins. Such is the binding force of the Word of God, which uniteth the hearts of them that have renounced all else but Him, who have believed in His signs...⁵ Bahá’u’lláh

* See *The Book of Certitude*, p. 72; see also *Paris Talks*, pp. 54-57 for a rather complete review of the seemingly unfulfilled prophecies regarding the first advent of Jesus as well as their symbolic meanings.

What can we learn from all these examples? Simply that we should not consider ourselves infallible; that the divine language is unique, pregnant with inner meanings, often beyond the perception of the literal-minded; that we should examine the new meanings without any preconceived notions; that we should not allow an unconventional interpretation to become an obstacle in our way, until we know the Interpreter Himself.

More severe tests for the Jews were yet to come. These will be soon reviewed.

2

The Kingdom of God Grows Like a Seed

Gradualism a Universal Law

There exists a deep desire in us all to obtain immediate results, to effect quick changes, to gain rewards without delay. We dream of a heavenly power that could crush all the evil forces swiftly and efficiently, an unseen hand that could uplift us from darkness and despair, that could establish the heavenly Kingdom with one stroke. Yet from experience we know too well that nothing of great consequence can ever rise out of impatience.

The whole design of creation revolves around gradualism. Let us begin at the beginning: the fetus goes through a rather long period of preparation before entering the next realm of existence, only to be faced with still more stringent demands on its way to maturity. Not only the babe, but society as well, must go through such phases or stages. It took thousands of years for humanity to reach its present phase of maturity.

Certainly it would have been within God's power to make all people perfect from the beginning. But perfection would have dulled the whole joy of living—hoping, trying, learning, conquering, growing. For human life stands on hope—a brighter future, a new star upon the horizon. Without hope, life would lose its drama, its adventure, its sense of anticipation.

The same applies to the life of every religion—the progressive unfoldment of the regenerative power of divine Wisdom. History reveals that all religions were dominated by the principle of gradualism. No redeemer was ever faced with receptive crowds, with triumph without struggle, birth without labor.

A woman in labor is in pain because her time has come; but when the child is born she forgets the anguish in her joy that a man has been born into the world. John 16:21 NEB

The summer does not arrive in full bloom; it always signals its arrival by tender shoots:

Learn a lesson from the fig-tree. When its tender shoots appear and are breaking into leaf, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all this happening, you may know that the end is near... Mark 13:28-29 NEB

The social evolution of human race began with family unity, then tribe, city-state, nation, and now, in our age, it has potentially attained the stage of world unity. God's plan of creation ordains that humanity move progressively toward world unity. Sudden evolution does not stand in harmony with His Wisdom, otherwise He would have made mankind, from the beginning, one people under one religion. In the words of the Báb:

Had it been Our wish, We would have brought all men into one fold...¹

And in the words of the Qur'án:

Had thy Lord pleased he would have made mankind of one religion... Qur'án 11:120

Among the potentials granted to us by our Creator are patience and resignation. God does not simply ask us to adhere to these virtues, without manifesting them in the mirrors of His own Self, and in His own relation to us. The following words of Bahá'u'lláh are indeed illuminating:

He Who leadeth to true victory is come. By the righteousness of God! He is fully capable of revolutionizing the world through the power of a single Word. Having enjoined upon all men to

observe wisdom, He Himself hath adhered to the cord of patience and resignation.²

If God had not adhered to resignation, if He had not been patient with us, we would have had no chance to continue in rebellion, to persist in our denial of truth for ages. For the masses of mankind have always rejected the truth. In *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* Bahá'u'lláh quotes the following verse from the Qur'án:

Should God punish men for their perverse doings, he would not leave on earth a moving thing! but to an appointed term doth He respite them; and when their term is come, they shall not delay or advance it an hour.

Qur'án 16:68

The Sovereignty Expected by the Jews

The principle of gradualism is exemplified perfectly in the triumph of Christianity, and human impatience in the attitude of the Jews at the time of Jesus.

In addition to the tests mentioned, there were more tests for the Jews yet to come; they had to face other seemingly unfulfilled expectations. As the Scriptures indicate, God had promised “by the lips of his holy prophets” that He would send a Savior to deliver the Jews from servitude, One who would occupy the throne of David. Here is the promise made to David:

The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father and he will be my son...Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.

II Samuel 7:11-16 NIV

There are at least two confirmations of such a promise in the New Testament. Here is one spoken by the angel Gabriel to Mary:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for God has been gracious to you; you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title “Son of the Most High;” the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever; his reign shall never end.

Luke 1:30-33 NEB

And here is another confirmation of the promise spoken through Zechariah:

So he promised: age after age he proclaimed by the lips of his holy prophets, that he would deliver us from our enemies, out of the hands of all who hate us; that he would deal mercifully with our fathers, calling to mind his solemn covenant. Such was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from enemy hands, and grant us, free from fear, to worship him with a holy worship, with uprightness of heart, in his presence, our whole life long.

Luke 1:70-75 NEB

What did the Jews receive in place of a Deliverer expected to occupy the throne of the great king, David? Did Jesus deliver them from servitude to the Romans? Did He deliver peace and prosperity, security and sovereignty? Did He in any way resemble the glorious king who was to reign like David, the pride of Israel? Jesus was expected not only to be a king, but a king imperishable and everlasting:

The people answered, ‘Our Law teaches us that the Messiah continues for ever. What do you mean by saying that the Son of Man must be lifted up? What Son of Man is this?’ John 12:34 NEB

Jesus’ Interpretation of Sovereignty

How did Jesus respond to the preceding question, that the Messiah must endure forever? Simply that:

“The light is among you still, but not for long. Go on your way while you have the light, so that darkness may not overtake you. He who journeys in the dark does not know where he is going.

While you have the light, trust to the light, so that you may become men of light.” After these words Jesus went away from them into hiding. John 12:35-36 NEB

Instead of a literal king who would endure for ever, they received “light,” and not even an enduring light, for the Day-Star of divine guidance was soon to be eclipsed by the clouds of cruelty, illusion, and fantasy.

How could the Jews reconcile their expectation with reality? What an awesome test for the seekers of truth in that trying and dark age.

The Jews were disappointed not only by what they could see, but also by what they could hear. For they could not even hear words of triumph or peace. On the contrary, the words spoken to them carried a sense of sadness and gloom; they foretold more war, more defeat, more humiliation. Here is what they heard about their dearly-loved city Jerusalem, the crown of their pride and the center of their civilization:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.* Matthew 23:37-39

As Jesus foretold, Jerusalem was indeed forsaken by God, and for nearly two millenniums it suffered repeated ravages, humiliations, and wars. Only in the 19th-century did it begin to attract the scattered children of Israel even “as a hen gathers her brood under her wing.” (More about Jerusalem later.)

It seems fitting to study once again the prophecies on the expected king of the Jews in the light of the whole spectrum of divine Wisdom, to compare man’s ways and God’s ways, and see how widely they differ.

* The coming of the Lord refers to the return of Christ Himself. In this and other verses, the triumphant return of the Jews to Jerusalem is associated with Christ’s Second Advent.

The Sovereignty of Christ

Let us go back to the original question and learn how Jesus fulfilled the worldly aspirations of the Jews. The sovereignty expected by the Jews did eventually arrive, but not before three centuries had passed. Only patience, dedication, resignation, and hard work could deliver the kingdom the Jews had so dearly expected. It is God's wish to accomplish His purpose through "the instruments" He has created, and not through forced compliance, to carry His Cause by the people's volition, and not by the power of His mighty Will. This is how He preserves and honors our freedom of choice. He provides us with the plan and then leaves us to choose and implement the plan on our own. The sacrifice of many thousands of dedicated believers was needed, before the glorious sovereignty of David under Jesus of Nazareth could sprout and spread, could become a glowing reality. During the interval of those three centuries people had to live on faith, to recognize that a healthy seed cannot but grow heavenward, cannot but mature and multiply. Faith in the divine Wisdom was the only sign given to them, the only evidence they could depend on.

Even when the destined hour did arrive and victory prevailed, the promised ascendancy and glory could come only under the name of the new Savior. Only those who bowed to the Redeemer could partake of the fruits of the prophecies—the promises made long ago. Those who remained obstinate in their denial, even after the hour of victory, had to wait for many centuries until the promised Savior would come again under still another name to give them another opportunity.

The Kingdom of God Begins as a Small Seed

Now once again, we, the people of this age, are facing the same test of faith encountered by the Jews. Do we have enough faith in our Creator's powers? This is exactly what Jesus asked long ago:

But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Luke 18:8 NEB

Yes, once again our faith is on trial. But in some ways we are privileged, for compared to the Jews of the time of Jesus we enjoy many advantages: we have more evidence and examples to learn from. Aside from logical support as well as the accumulated and undeniable records of history, we have the prophetic words of Christ pointing to the progressive unfoldment of divine plan and the gradual triumph of His kingdom in His second advent.

Let us review some of these prophecies. In the following passage Jesus likened God's Kingdom to a small seed that grows little by little until it covers the earth:

He also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.'

Mark 4:26-29 NIV

To ensure full comprehension as well as adequate emphasis, Jesus supported the preceding parable by still another, containing almost identical elements:

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

Mark 4:30-32 NIV

See also Matthew 13:31-33

True, the message is couched in parable, but it is readily perceptible. Further, the implied message accords with reason as well as the records of history, harmonizes with the immutable divine plan, and finds support from many other scriptural passages.

To dispel the overwhelming misjudgments of the people of our age, Jesus used still another parable equally convincing, for He knew too well that His Message would once again rise amidst

rejecting crowds. He used the parable of “a king who prepared a feast for his son’s wedding,” but the guests would not come. They were too busy, too preoccupied with their own pursuits; and from amongst many who were called, only a few were chosen or deemed worthy of the feast; the great masses were found unprepared (Matt. 22:1-14). (“Wedding” as used in the Gospel often symbolizes the advent of the new age; Jesus called Himself “Bridegroom” and His Revelation “Bride.”)

Among all the prophecies pointing to the progressive growth of the new Revelation, perhaps the most instructive are the ones comparing the conditions prevalent during the second advent of Christ to those of Noah and Lot.

As things were in Noah’s days, so will they be in the days of the Son of Man. They ate and drank and married, until the day that Noah went into the ark and the flood came and made an end of them all.

Luke 17:26-28 NEB

See also Matt. 24:37-39

Where lies the parallel? Noah came in an age of spiritual darkness (Gen. 6:12), so the masses did not discern the light of His Wisdom. He lived a long life and through many tribulations before His influence could at last spread, His Wisdom adored. Victory would not come quickly.

Likewise punishment was delayed for decades; people were given time to come to terms with reality, opportunity to test themselves, to prove themselves, to rid themselves of earthly cares and concerns. Only after repeated warnings were they brought face to face with the consequences of their misdeeds and denial.

But the respite given them was of no avail. The masses stood firm in their denial of divine call. They remained unaware of the presence of Noah, their Savior, in their midst; they were too preoccupied with worldly cares to find time for the life of the spirit. Only divine punishment, only disaster could awaken them to reality.

Similar events struck the people of Sodom, whom Lot* sought to guide to the path of righteousness. The people of Sodom (as well

* Lot was Abraham’s nephew. The scriptures regard him as a righteous man (II Peter 2:7), and the Qur’án as a teacher of righteousness.

as Gomorrah) refused to respond to the divine call, sinking further and further into decadence. Disaster was the natural consequence of their denial.

In the book of Revelation (6:10-11), we read about the impatience of the believers (in the new Revelation) who cannot wait for divine punishment. In response they are told to “rest yet for a little season,” awaiting further persecution. (This verse in itself points to the rejection of the new Revelation by the masses of people.) Once again we see that a waiting period must intercede between the sprouting season and the season of fruition. It is far from God’s Justice to punish His rebellious children before providing them with ample time for restitution, without giving them repeated warnings.

Only Have Faith, Patience, and Courage (‘Abdu’l-Bahá)

To build anew, the builder must prepare the ground. “The mountains must be leveled” (Isa. 54:10; Rev. 16:20), “the valleys exalted” (Isa. 40:4), everything restructured, for a new world is in store—all things must be made new (Rev. 21:5).

Ours is the most critical time in human history; it is the age of transition, the period of preparation, the crumbling of the old world order (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43; Isa. 6:10-12), to pave the way and give rise to the new, “for the old order has passed away” (Rev. 21:4 NEB). It is the age in which darkness is blinded by the light.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

John 1:5

If we do not give up hope, if we persist with patience and resignation, we shall all see the light in the plenitude of its glory, we shall see all the promises fulfilled to the fullest:

For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

Hebrews 10:36

3

Expecting Spectacular Dramas and Dazzling Displays of Power

Expecting the Redeemer to Come from Heaven

“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” people wondered. The familiar, the commonplace, carries no honor for the masses. To be credible, the Savior must do something unusual, unnatural, unearthly. Yet the breaking of natural laws, the disrupting of the order of things, stands contrary to divine Wisdom; it disturbs the whole scheme of man’s spiritual existence; it violates his very freedom.

Such unreasonable expectations, as the descent of the Redeemer from heavenly sphere with power and splendor, or His rise from the inner cores of the earth with glory and majesty (a belief held by Shí’ah Muslims) prevail at the dawn of the advent of all divine Revelations; human fancy marvels at and is enchanted by spectacular and dazzling events—events encircled with the halo of majesty, magnificence, and great glory.

Those expecting the second advent of Christ anticipated and looked for spectacular and dazzling events both on earth and in heaven. Like their ancestors who had awaited the physical descent of Elijah from heaven during the first coming of Christ, the contemporaries of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh also expected the

visible return of their Savior from the heavenly spheres. Bahá'u'lláh declared that He had indeed fulfilled the prophecy even as He had in His first coming. In the following passage He refers to Himself both in the first (My) and in the third (He) Person, even as Christ did:

Say: We, in truth, have opened unto you the gates of the Kingdom. Will ye bar the doors of your houses in My face? This indeed is naught but a grievous error. He, verily, hath again come down from heaven, even as He came down from it the first time. Beware lest ye dispute that which He proclaimeth, even as the people before you disputed His utterances. Thus instructeth you the True One, could ye but perceive it.¹

Jesus had to face precisely this same objection. The following excerpts from the Gospel demonstrate the point:

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me...They [the Israelites] said, “Surely this is Jesus son of Joseph; we know his father and mother. How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” John 6:38, 42 NEB

For most of us it is difficult to picture a soul—an unseen entity—descending from heaven, because such an occurrence is abstract and removed from our everyday mundane experiences. But the descent of a body is quite easy to perceive, for it remains well within the range of our perceptions. Besides, it is more dramatic, appealing, and reassuring to believe that something physical, rather than spiritual, is to descend. Human imagination is intrigued by supernatural or dramatic events. This is why the symbolism is so soon forgotten and the literal meaning so readily perceived and so long cherished and exalted.

Expecting the World to End

Another example of misconceptions prevalent among the Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's contemporaries was the belief that at the time of the advent of the expected Redeemer the world would come to an

end. Bahá'u'lláh indicated that by the end was meant the end of the age, the end of an era, or the end of a religious cycle. The old world order, He said, was soon to be rolled up, “and a new one spread out in its stead:”

By My Self! The day is approaching when We will have rolled up the world and all that is therein, and spread out a new order in its stead. He, verily, is powerful over all things.²

After Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation, it took decades before the scholars came to realize that when the disciples asked about the end of the world, they meant the end of the age—of prophecy and expectation—and not the literal destruction of the world.* So in the new translations of the Scriptures, such expressions as “the end of the age,” “the consummation of the age” or “the end of the system of things” have replaced “the end of the world.” Here is a passage comparing three versions, The King James, The New English Bible, and New World Translation:

...what shall be the sign of thy coming, and the end of the world? Matthew 24:3 KJV

...what will be the signal for your coming and the end of the age? NEB

...what will be the sign of your presence and of the conclusion of the system of things? NWT
See also Matt. 13:39-41; 28:20

The Book of Revelation predicts the ending of the old age, the passing away of the old order, and the dawning of the new:

I heard a loud voice proclaiming from the throne: ‘Now at last God has his dwelling among men! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away!’ Then he who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold! I am making all things new!’ Revelation 21:3-5 NEB

* The word “aeon,” previously translated “world,” is basically a time word meaning: “a space of time, an age.”

Although the new translations have been in print for quite a few years, many believers still hold on to the literal destruction of the world. Once a view is established and reinforced through centuries of repetition, it spreads deep roots, unyielding to evidence. Little wonder superstitions endure even among the educated.

The words of Bahá'u'lláh provide us with the key that solves all the mysteries of the Scriptures. Let us interpret a biblical passage that has escaped the attention of many a Bible reader:

And be assured, I am with you always, to the end of time.

Matthew 28:20 NEB

And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:20 NIV

The preceding are the words of Jesus addressed to His disciples. If taken literally, they stand unfulfilled. What did Jesus mean by “always”? And what did He mean by the “end of time,” or “the end of the age”? Is “the end of time” or “the end of the age” a designated point in history, or is it a time that never arrives? In the light of the knowledge provided by Bahá'u'lláh the inner meanings glow with simplicity: Jesus promised to be the source of spiritual guidance for His followers until the end of His prophetic cycle or dispensation, designated by expressions such as “the end of the age” or “the end of time.” During that whole period Jesus remained in spirit the loyal companion of His true believers. He always supported them, upheld them, and accompanied them. But once the cycle ended, the relationship changed. For once a new cycle begins, a new purpose dawns. The passage itself explains the meaning of “always:” “I will be with you always, to the end of the age.”

The Old Testament sometimes uses the word “for ever” in the same sense Jesus used “always:”

The Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, they shall keep it in every generation as a covenant for ever.

Exodus 31:16 NEB

The expression “the end of the age” signals the end of any religious dispensation. But it is used specifically to point to the ending of religious dispensations in our age. For it was God’s plan to establish many religions during the period known as the Adamic Cycle, as a preparation for the dawning of a new Universal Cycle

begun by the Báb in the year 1844. The new Revelation stands as the consummation of all Revelations, a central point to which they all lead and in which they all merge.

Expecting Physical Ascendancy in the Savior

People expect spectacular events to occur not only in heaven and on earth but also in relation to the physical existence of the Messengers. They idealize their Savior, regarding Him as a being free from physical limitations. He does not supposedly walk upon the earth; He soars mysteriously above it. There are halos around His head and expressions upon His face that readily distinguish Him from all earthly beings. He doesn't come from just any little old town such as Nazareth. The least he can do is to come from an unknown place (John 7:27-28), the ethereal and uncharted spheres of heaven.

Dissatisfaction with the Messenger's seeming weaknesses finds its most blunt expression in the words of those rejecting Muhammad:

What sort of an apostle is this, who eats food, and walks through the streets? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give admonition with him? Qur'an 25:7 Y

Divine Wisdom has ordained that humans should find the truth through their own choice, and not through the power of the spectacular, the miraculous. And so to honor human freedom, God sends a humble man who lives simply and modestly, who never lifts Himself above those who walk with Him, who allows physical weaknesses to touch Him. He grows sick, old, tired, thirsty. He even dies. He allows Himself to be persecuted, in spite of His all-encompassing power. He wishes to be recognized by His simple acts of kindness, the nobility of His Spirit, never by the supremacy of His body. Yet the people cannot get used to God's ways. And they are surprised:

Doth it seem strange to the people that We should have revealed the Book to a man from among themselves in order to purge them and give them the good tidings...³

The words of Jesus addressed to the objectors are quite relevant here:

...what sets itself up to be admired by men is detestable in the sight of God. Luke 16:15 NEB

God extols purity, we adore power; God admires humility, we exalt pride.

To base the validity of divine Revelation on miracles is to reduce its supreme station to sheer superstition and blind faith. Besides, if miracles were to count as the ultimate proof, the divine religions could not rival even the religions of the pagans. For the pagans excel in attributing multitudes of the most astounding miracles to their gods.

From the examples offered, it becomes evident how misconceptions prevent the people from recognizing the truth they claim they adore. Instead of pondering the words of the Messenger and the proofs of His Mission, they persecute Him, and perhaps crucify Him. And then, centuries later, they begin to wonder if they had not been misusing or misinterpreting the divine Words. They begin to submit to the new Messenger in great multitudes, to pray to Him, to worship Him, and to build magnificent shrines in His name. Once again the Messenger is idealized—from then on, He begins to appear with a halo around His head and a beam in His eyes. Thus the religious cycle repeats itself from age to age.

If one were to collect all the expectations people cherish concerning the second coming of Christ, one would come up with a sizable list, containing many odd and unusual hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

The promise of the second advent of Christ is the most emphatic theme in the Scriptures. According to one authority:

The return of Christ is mentioned 318 times in the 260 chapters of the New Testament. One verse out of every 25 points to this great event. More is said about it than about any other theme in the Bible.⁴

Yet in spite of all the promises and the emphasis, churches disagree even as to the Advent itself. The World Council of Churches, after a

lengthy deliberation, could not settle this very question: “Will Jesus ever return?” No wonder Jesus expressed His concern saying:

But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Luke 18:8 NEB

The churches cannot agree even on the most definite and conclusive words of the Scriptures, yet one gets the impression that almost every reader of the Bible knows in his heart that his interpretations are sound and his expectations realistic and reasonable—a supposition identical with that cherished by the Jews during the first coming of Jesus.

Was Jesus not expected “to sit upon the throne of David?” And did He not interpret the prophecies by saying that His Kingdom was not of this world?

Was Jesus not expected to sustain and reaffirm the Laws of Moses? And did He not abrogate some of those same Laws (the Laws of Sabbath and divorce, for instance)?

Was it not expected that during His reign the Jews would “prosper and triumph over all the peoples of the world”? And were not the Jews in the time of Jesus living “in the utmost abasement and servitude,” under the Roman Empire?

Was He not expected to establish justice among the people, to the extent that it would spread even to the animal kingdom? And did the accusers not object that during His days, instead of justice, injustice had reigned, and reached a point where He Himself was being condemned and crucified?

Was He not expected “to rule with a rod of iron” and to reign with the sword? And did the objectors not refute Him by saying that He did not own even a wooden staff? (See ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words, *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*, Chapter 1.)

Bahá’u’lláh in His *Book of Certitude* asks the seekers of truth again and again to look back and reconsider the examples of history, the fate of previous Messengers. If this guide alone were heeded, no Redeemer would ever be rejected. Yes, the worldly-minded worship and exalt the wonders of the flesh; those stirred by spirit seek and adore solely the spiritual wonders.

4

Every Redeemer Rejected

Every Messenger Faced with Denial

What is the destiny of God's Messengers? Do the prophecies indicate that the Redeemer of our age will be denied and persecuted again? History reveals that all religions, all prophets, faced denial and persecution:

Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?

Acts 7:52

Bahá'u'lláh declares that every divine Messenger encountered “the denials, the repudiation, and the vehement opposition of the people around Him.”¹ He then quotes these Qur'anic verses:

No Messenger cometh unto them but they laugh Him to scorn.

Qur'án 36:30

Each nation hath plotted darkly against their Messenger to lay violent hold on Him, and disputed with vain words to invalidate the truth.

Qur'án 40:5

Persecution strengthens the seed of faith, helps it grow deep roots and mature. Further, He who seeks to educate humankind must be an Exemplar for His ideals, must set a perfect example of sacrifice, selflessness, and devotion to truth, even to the point of death. Indeed it would be difficult to honor a Messenger who has lived a life of

luxury and ease, who has evaded adversity, who has refused to taste the bitterness of ridicule and rejection, who has not allowed His sincerity to be put to the severest tests.

Let us review a few scriptural references on rejection and denial. A most intriguing passage in all the Scriptures is the following by Christ describing not only the mood of the people of His day, but the mood of the people at the dawn of every dispensation, for they all act and have acted in identical ways:

How can I describe this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-place and shouting at each other, “We piped for you and you would not dance. We wept and wailed, and you would not mourn.” Matthew 11:16-17 NWB

What is surprising is that the people forget the lessons of history; they return again and again from reality to wishful thinking. They exonerate themselves by saying that what happened to the deniers of Jesus, or other deniers who ignored or persecuted God’s previous Messengers, cannot happen to them. They are not even sure about this point. For sometimes they say, “I believe if Jesus ever comes back, He will be rejected again.” But once told that this is exactly what has happened, they refuse to believe. As the words of Jesus imply: could God ever play all the conflicting tunes or melodies we expect Him to play? If He plays happy music we fail to dance; if He sings sad songs we refuse to mourn.

The Redeemer Prophesied to Be Rejected Again

That the Redeemer of our age has to contend with rejecting crowds is a fact established in prophecies from many scriptures. Several parables point to the rejection of the Son of Man by the masses of the people. Some of these have already been presented. Other prophecies compare the conditions surrounding the coming of the Son of Man with those surrounding Noah and Lot (Matt. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-30). (See Chapter 2.) Here is another passage pointing to rejection:

The world cannot receive him...

John 14:17 NEB

See also Rev. 19:19-21; 20:4

In still another prophecy, Jesus predicts rejection, but it is not clear whether He refers to His First or Second Advent, or both, for He applied the title “the Prince of this world” to both advents:

...the Prince of this world stands condemned.

John 16:11 NEB

See also John 12:31

In the following passage, He grants the title “the prince of this world” to the Redeemer of our age:

I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming.

John 14:30 NIV

Compare the preceding with the following:

I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’

Luke 13:35 NIV

Here is still another prophecy covered in Volume II:

For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man.

Luke 17:24-26 NIV

The preceding prophecy clearly indicates that the coming of the Son of Man does not begin with earthly light and glory. We are told that the promised Redeemer will be first rejected by those living under the Christian dispensation, and then later be noticed and recognized. To emphasize His Message, Jesus cited the destiny of Noah (the classic example of the denial of a Messenger by the masses) as a guide to the seekers of truth.

It is evident that Jesus used the word “generation” with a specific meaning in mind. He used it to refer to His spiritual descendants, namely “the whole multitude of people destined to live during the Christian dispensation.” Such a meaning is clearly confirmed in Bible Lexicons. For one of the meanings they offer for the word “generation” is: “The whole multitude of people living in a period of time” (Abbott-Smith). Obviously this is the only meaning in

harmony with the predicted course of events. For after giving the many signs of His return (Matt. 24:3-33), Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Matthew 24:34-35 NIV

If we take the word “generation” literally, we find that Jesus’ prediction of events did not come true. His contemporaries did not live to see “all these things.” According to *Harper Study Bible*:

Only in the sense that the destruction of Jerusalem took place in A.D. 70 was it true that any of Christ’s contemporaries lived to see the fulfillment of these things.²

To conclude, we are told to expect first rejection and suffering, and then later anticipate light and glory.

The Scriptural Image of the People of Our Age

Whether we like it or not, our image as portrayed in the Scriptures is not a glowing one; in fact, it is dark and gloomy. This is what happens at the end of all spiritual cycles, when the light of faith reaches its lowest point, when it dims beyond detection.

It is intriguing to note that, on the one hand, the scriptural prophecies encourage the seekers of the Kingdom to stand ready and receptive, free from worldly cares, and on the other, they predict that they won’t. This is the encouragement:

Keep a watch on yourselves; do not let your minds be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly cares so that the great Day closes upon you suddenly like a trap; for that day will come on all men, wherever they are, the whole world over. Be on the alert, praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all these imminent troubles and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man. Luke 21:34-36 NEB

And this is the prediction:

You must face the fact: the final age of this world is to be a time of troubles. Men will love nothing but money and self; they will be arrogant, boastful, and abusive; with no respect for parents, no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection; they will be implacable in their hatreds, scandal-mongers, intemperate and fierce, strangers to all goodness, traitors, adventurers, swollen with self-importance. They will be men who put pleasure in the place of God, men who preserve the outward form of religion, but are a standing denial of its reality...who are always wanting to be taught, but are incapable of reaching a knowledge of the truth.

II Timothy 3:1-7 NEB

The Scriptures describe our day again and again as a day of darkness and cloud, as a period of injustice, intolerance, selfishness, worldliness. Note the marvelous harmony between the following six passages from various books of the Bible:

That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Zephaniah 1:15

A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness...there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.

Joel 2:2

It will be a time of great distress; there has never been such a time from the beginning of the world until now, and will never be again.

Matthew 24:21 NEB

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.

Amos 8:12

See also Amos 5:18

That day cannot come before the final rebellion against God, when wickedness will be revealed in human form, the man doomed to perdition.

II Thessalonians 2:3 NEB

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time

of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. Daniel 12:1

Of course the denial and darkness go together. If people were enlightened they could not, and would not, deny their Savior. In fact, they would not even need a Savior. Christ strongly rebuked His generation, and so did Bahá'u'lláh. Here are the words of Jesus:

What an unbelieving and perverse generation! How long shall I be with you? How long must I endure you? Matthew 17:17-18 NEB

And again:

If anyone is ashamed of me and mine in this wicked and godless age, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him, when he comes in the glory of his Father and of the holy angels. Mark 8:28 NEB
See also Mark 9:19; Philippians 2:15

And here are the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

The Pen of the Most High is unceasingly calling; and yet, how few are those that have inclined their ear to its voice! The dwellers of the kingdom of names [earthly kingdom] have busied themselves with the gay livery of the world, forgetful that every man that hath eyes to perceive and ears to hear cannot but readily recognize how evanescent are its colors.

A new life is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth; and yet none hath discovered its cause or perceived its motive. Consider the peoples of the West. Witness how, in their pursuit of that which is vain and trivial, they have sacrificed, and are still sacrificing, countless lives for the sake of its establishment and promotion.³

Bahá'u'lláh's words to those who persecuted the new Revelation in the land of its origin are far more severe:

Reflect upon the villainous behavior of this generation, and witness their astounding ingratitude. Observe how they have closed their eyes to all this glory...⁴

Similarly the Báb addresses again and again those who reject His Cause without ever examining it:

You are like unto the man who layeth out an orchard and planteth all kinds of fruit trees therein. When the time is at hand for him, the lord, to come, ye will have taken possession of the orchard in his name, and when he doth come in person, ye will shut him out from it...

Be ye not a cause of grief unto Us, nor withhold Us from this Orchard which belongeth unto Us, though independent are We of all that ye possess. Moreover, unto none of you shall We make this property lawful, were it even to the extent of a mustard seed. Verily, the Reckoner are We.⁵

The book of Revelation addresses today's seven major religions (or churches*) one by one, reminding them of both their responsibility and failure. Here are two passages containing both counsels and criticism:

But I have this against you: you have lost your early love. Think from what a height you have fallen; repent, and do as you once did. Otherwise, if you do not repent, I shall come to you and remove your lamp from its place...Hear, you who have ears to hear, what the Spirit says to the churches! Revelation 2:4-7 NEB

And again:

I know all your ways; you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were either hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'How rich I am! and how well I have done! I have everything I want.' In fact, though you do not know it, you are the most pitiful wretch, poor, blind, and naked. So I advise you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, to make you truly rich, and white clothes to put on to hide the shame of your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so that you may see. All whom I love I reprove and discipline. Be on your mettle therefore and

* For a description of today's seven major religions and their correspondence to the seven churches of the Book of Revelation, please see *The Apocalypse Unsealed*, pp. 49-55.

repent. Here I stand knocking at the door; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper with him and he with me. To him who is victorious I will grant a place on my throne, as I myself was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Hear, you who have ears to hear, what the Spirit says to the churches! Revelation 3:15-22 NEB

Rejection Itself an Evidence of the Fulfillment of Prophecies

Those who say if Bahá'u'lláh is indeed a divine Messenger, why have the masses of humanity rejected Him, why have the religious leaders ignored Him, should recognize that by their very questioning they point to the fulfillment of the prophecies. The action and the attitude of both the masses of humanity and their religious leaders stand in perfect harmony with the scriptural predictions.

These prophecies should awaken the masses to the fact that since rejection of the Redeemer is more likely than acceptance, since indifference and apathy are more common than spiritual desire and devotion, they should make even extra effort and take extra care so that they will not stand among the indifferent and apathetic masses; they should be more willing to acknowledge that in the dark world of ours, it is difficult to discern the divine Spirit—Him who is promised to come as a thief in the gloomy night, veiled by darkness, clouds, and smoke—it is difficult to find the gate of the Kingdom:

Enter by the narrow gate. The gate is wide that leads to perdition, there is plenty of room on the road, and many go that way; but the gate that leads to life is small and the road is narrow, and those who find it are few. Matthew 7:13-14 NEB

Humanity Given Time to Turn to God

Will the masses of people heed the divine call, before “the appointed time”? Will they awaken and arise for the triumph of the Spirit before

“the great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21) has reached its zenith? Does the world need disasters as dramatic as those of Noah’s time to respond to the Spirit of truth?

Bahá’u’lláh declares again and again that it is within our potential either to inflict or to avert disaster, but not to hinder the dawn of the Kingdom, the arrival of the hour of victory; that is inevitable. On the one hand, He warns, as Christ did, of imminent disasters:

We have a fixed time for you, O peoples. If ye fail, at the appointed hour, to turn towards God, He, verily, will lay violent hold on you, and will cause grievous afflictions to assail you from every direction.⁶

And on the other, He assures us that at the appointed hour the promised victory will undoubtedly dawn:

The hour is approaching when ye will witness the power of the one true God triumphing over all created things and the signs of His sovereignty encompassing all creation. On that day ye will discover how all else besides Him will have been forgotten and come to be regarded as utter nothingness.⁷

Here is part of a prayer by Bahá’u’lláh, predicting the triumph of the forces of light over the hosts of oppression and denial:

This is the Lamp [Bahá’u’lláh] which the light of Thine own Essence hath lit, and whose radiance the winds of discord can never extinguish. This is the Ocean that moveth by the power of Thy sovereign might, and whose waves the influence of the infidels that have disbelieved in the Judgment Day can never still. This is the Sun that shineth in the heaven of Thy will and the splendor of which the veils of the workers of iniquity and the doubts of the evil doers can never cloud.

I yield Thee thanks, O my God, for that Thou hast offered me up as a sacrifice in Thy path, and made me a target for the arrows of afflictions as a token of Thy love for Thy servants, and singled me out for all manner of tribulation for the regeneration of Thy people.

How sweet to my taste is the savor of woes sent by Thee, and how dear to my heart the dispositions of Thy providence! Perish

the soul that fleeth from the threats of kings in its attempt to save itself in Thy days! I swear by Thy glory! Whoso hath quaffed the living waters of Thy favors can fear no trouble in Thy path, neither can he be deterred by any tribulation from remembering Thee or from celebrating Thy praise.⁸

Here, the divine Voice addresses Bahá'u'lláh, saying:

The eyes of the world were gladdened at the sight of Thy luminous countenance, and yet the peoples have united to put out Thy light, O Thou in Whose hands are the reins of the worlds! All the atoms of the earth have celebrated Thy praise, and all created things have been set ablaze with the drops sprinkled by the ocean of Thy love, and yet the people still seek to quench Thy fire. Nay—and to this Thine own Self beareth me witness—they are all weakness, and Thou, verily, art the All-Powerful; and they are but paupers and Thou, in truth, art the All-Possessing; and they are impotent and Thou art, truly, the Almighty. Naught can ever frustrate Thy purpose, neither can the dissensions of the world harm Thee. Through the breaths of Thine utterance the heaven of understanding hath been adorned, and by the effusions of Thy pen every moldering bone hath been quickened.⁹

Part II

A Study of Scriptural Symbolism, Its Uses and Purposes

The divine Teachers speak in a unique and distinct language, invested with many meanings, a language befitting their divine station. They do not imitate the ways of men, for they receive their Words from a source higher than their own self, not lower. They are the well-springs of new knowledge; innovators, not imitators.

5

A Stone that Causes Men to Stumble

Romans 9:33 NIV

The Distinct Language of Revelation

In crossing to the other side the disciples had forgotten to take bread with them. So, when Jesus said to them, “Beware, be on your guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”, they began to say among themselves, “It is because we have brought no bread!” Knowing what was in their minds, Jesus said to them: “Why do you talk about bringing no bread? Where is your faith? Do you not understand even yet?...How can you fail to see that I was not speaking about bread? Be on your guard, I said, against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood: they were to be on their guard, not against baker’s leaven, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 16:5-12 NEB

Why did Jesus use the word “leaven” to mean “teaching”? And why did His discerning and astute Apostles fail to understand the symbol? If the Apostles had difficulty comprehending their Master, can we claim mastery of His words? Had the symbol “leaven” not been explained, could we have “unsealed” it on our own?

Here are a few other examples from the Scriptures demonstrating symbolism (interpretation provided later):

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Luke 3:15-16 NIV

What did John mean by “fire”? He did not elaborate.

I have come to bring division.

Luke 12:52 NEB

See also Matthew 10:35, Luke 14:26

Why would Jesus say, “I have come to bring division”?

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.

Mark 9:43

What did Jesus mean by “if thy hand offend thee, cut it off...”? And by “the fire that never shall be quenched”?

The divine Teachers speak in a unique and distinct language, invested with many meanings, a language befitting their supreme station. They do not imitate the ways of the people, for they receive their Words from a source higher than their own Self, not lower. They are the well-springs of new knowledge; innovators and creators, not imitators.

We often tend to lower the divine Words to human ways, instead of raising the human to divine.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

The inability of the people to distinguish between the symbolic and literal words and their unwillingness to accept the judgment of the new Redeemer have been perhaps the greatest obstacle in the path of the search for truth. A most fundamental key in the understanding of the Scriptures is to separate the literal from the figurative. This constitutes a major theme of this book.

Applying the Scientific Approach to the Study of the Scriptures

In this age of knowledge and enlightenment, rarely are scientific or objective methods applied to the understanding of the sacred Words. Essential to the mastery of every discipline is the comprehension of the technical terms or expressions used in the discipline. Such a requirement is taken for granted in all the domains of knowledge, and never questioned. Yet when it comes to religion, a new standard is adopted and applied. It seems as if every reader of the Scriptures considers himself a qualified or almost infallible interpreter. Rarely does the believer recognize the awesome complexities of interpretation.

Lack of the comprehension of signs and symbols is accompanied and partly caused by still another perpetual problem: there seems to be a tendency in most believers to see and to remember only the precepts that fit into their established beliefs and to ignore or overlook the ones that do not. Once a particular point of view is taught, reinforced, and ratified by “authorities,” the succeeding readers or interpreters have a tendency to follow suit, to overlook anything that may fail to fit into the established pattern of preconceived notions.

A New Interpretation of the Scriptures

The interpretations offered here will prove novel and unconventional to all those unfamiliar with Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the Scriptures. They contain questions and complexities that seldom, if ever, are discussed in religious circles. They present many of those unspoken themes often escaping the vision of even the most astute readers of the Scriptures, questions that may seem mystical, controversial, or contradictory, concepts that the believer is told to accept on faith and never question, precepts that do not fit into the established patterns and are often unconsciously rejected or ignored as if they were never spoken.

Because of the novelty of interpretation, you may at times be startled. If this happens, please remain patient until you have reviewed the whole spectrum of the evidence.

Reason, not Tradition, Our Chief Guide to Truth

The path to the understanding of religion is reason, not blind faith or tradition. Reason unburdened by blind faith or tradition, but guided and inspired by a pure spirit, can ultimately uncover the truth, but blind faith without the guiding hand of reason cannot but fail and fall.

The interpretation offered here will follow reason, not convention. At no time will you be asked to accept anything on faith. On the contrary, you will constantly be reminded of the divine commandment to use reason (Isa. 1:18), and of Paul's admonition to "prove all things" (I Thess. 5:21).

Reason never contradicts revelation; the two stand as close partners, in perfect harmony. The spirit of inquiry and dedicated search for truth permeates the whole spectrum of the Scriptures (Matt. 7:7-8).

George Townshend in his work *Christ and Bahá'u'lláh* explains how the spirit of inquiry and thirst for truth was exemplified by the Christians during the early days of Christianity, and then gradually suppressed and finally abandoned. The early disciples encouraged rational thinking and demonstrated it in their own understanding and teaching of the Scriptures. Here is how Peter guided and admonished his fellow-believers in their attempt to teach Christianity to others:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. I Peter 3:15 NIV

And here is Paul's counsels:

Test everything. Hold on to the good. I Thessalonians 5:21 NIV

And finally, here is the example Paul set in his own teaching of Christianity:

Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. Acts 18:4 NIV

And again:

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures... Acts 17:2 NIV

Divine Revelation as revealed by great Messengers stands in full harmony with reason. But as time passes it faces so much alteration as to lose its original form—its purity and charm. At that point the believers find no choice but to resort to blind faith, as a haven for their beliefs. They replace their own fantasy for divine truth and defend it by saying that it is above human understanding, that it should not be questioned or tested. They know from experience that fanaticism cannot conform to reason, that fantasy cannot withstand the test of facts.

There are many who think and judge reasonably as long as the question does not pertain to religion. But as soon as it does, their whole perception immediately alters; they see differently, hear differently, and reason differently—according to entirely different rules of reasoning, new standards of thinking. Such a shift in perceiving or thinking is not new to our age. It has prevailed at the dawn of every dispensation.

To Conclude

The divine Messengers speak in a unique language—rich in symbolism. The key to the understanding of divine Words is recognition of the symbols. To stand in harmony with the spirit of the Scriptures, we must begin with a new outlook, a new vision; we must erase all traditional interpretations from our memories; we must begin with a willingness to follow the truth wherever it may lead us, even if to the least expected conclusions.

6

A Brief Study of Symbolism

Let us now begin with a study of symbolism as used in the Scriptures. Let us examine in depth the unique language spoken by divine Messengers.

The Two Modes of Communication

Communication stands on a spectrum ranging from purely figurative to purely literal, with most of the ordinary speech falling under the latter. The chief advantage of literal language is its preciseness, and hence its usefulness in scientific or factual communication, where exactness or precision is sought and prized. The chief advantage of figurative or symbolic language is the freedom it offers the reader—the freedom to use his own imaginative powers, the freedom to draw conclusions or discover concealed or implicit meanings.

Symbolism serves other purposes as well; for instance, to simplify the abstract by putting it into the mold of concrete images, to make stale or ordinary speech more memorable and striking; to convince or persuade; and finally to conceal meanings.

Symbolic devices (similes, metaphors, allegories) constitute refined or advanced means of communication; they enrich and adorn the language, increasing its subtlety and complexity. To comprehend or decode such abstract and refined means of expression, greater

wisdom or maturity is required. Such a requirement is best indicated in the way children interpret or conceive of symbolism. To a three-year-old child, a broken heart is something like a broken toy. The expression, “to be born again,” may mean nothing more than what the words literally convey. But as the child grows in maturity, he becomes increasingly aware that many of the words he has learned carry denotations and connotations which may convey totally different meanings.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. I Corinthians 13:11 NIV

Symbolism is used in all communication and perhaps in all languages, but it finds its best and perhaps most frequent use in the works of the divine Messengers and in all the other great masterpieces of the world, which merely reflect the beauty and grandeur of creative Word. In fact, the success of such masterpieces is to a large degree due to their extensive and refined use of symbolism. Communication through symbolic language is particularly common in the East—the dawning-place of the great religions of the world.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven...speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion...The other language is veiled and concealed...In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: “Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people.”¹

Let us now study the specific ways the two modes of communication are put to use.

The Literal Language, a Medium for Spiritual Values

Each of the two methods or mediums of communication, namely symbolic and literal, is endowed with specific advantages, and has lent itself to specific uses. In the holy scriptures, the literal medium is used primarily to convey or communicate moral-spiritual laws—teachings that require applications, laws that must be followed as guides to living. “These constitute the basis of divine Book.” The law of love, though subject to slightly varying interpretations, conveys the same basic meaning, carrying no concealed or veiled messages. In the world of humanity, love stands forever as the supreme sovereign, executing and extending its sovereignty through selflessness, sympathy, reverence, humility, understanding, loyalty, patience and trust. The same holds true with other values or virtues. One can seldom find any basic disagreement among the believers as to the meaning of honesty, charity, or friendship. These are defined, understood, and interpreted in similar ways.

Let us now explore the many ways in which the symbolic language is used.

Symbols as a Means of Enhancing Spiritual Values

The symbolic speech—unlike the literal—serves many purposes, among them to enhance or enrich the expression of moral-spiritual values, to make the underlying truth simpler, more memorable and striking. Here are a few examples:

Yet another said, ‘I will follow you, sir; but let me first say good-bye to my people at home.’ To him Jesus said, ‘No one who sets his hand to the plough and then keeps looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.’ Luke 9:61-62 NEB

No one who does not carry his cross and come with me can be a disciple of mine. Would any of you think of building a tower without first sitting down and calculating the cost, to see whether

he could afford to finish it? Otherwise, if he had laid its foundation and then is not able to complete it, all the onlooker will laugh at him. “There is the man”, they will say, “who started to build and could not finish.”

Luke 14:27-31 NEB

Let the little ones come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you that whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.

Luke 18:16-17 NEB

The profile of closed-mindedness is portrayed many times and in many Scriptures:

...for they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding. There is a prophecy of Isaiah which is being fulfilled for them: “You may hear and hear, but you will never understand; you may look and look, but you will never see. For this people’s mind has become gross; their ears are dulled, and their eyes are closed. Otherwise, their eyes might see, their ears hear, and their mind understand, and then they might turn again, and I would heal them.”

Matthew 13:13-15 NEB

See also Isa. 6:9-10; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27

Hearts have they with which they understand not, and eyes have they with which they see not.

Qur’án 7:178

Symbols as a Means of Simplifying Complex Questions

In addition to making values and virtues more vivid and memorable, symbolism finds another essential use: it serves to simplify complex philosophical, literary, or scientific precepts. It seems far simpler and less taxing to the mind to conceive of God as “Father” than as “an unknowable Essence.” It is also simpler to portray hell as “the place of flowing and flaming fire” and heaven as “the abode of enchanting streams” than to regard them as “spiritual states of being.”

Those taking the Scriptures literally still maintain that hell is “the place of wailing and grinding of teeth” (Matt. 8:12 NEB), “where the

devouring worm never dies and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48 NEB). Such a view disregards the potent power of imagery in making the abstract sensible, in turning the ethereal into real.

The story of creation as recorded in the Scriptures once again testifies to the usefulness of symbolism—how a simple story can satisfy the curious but incapable and unprepared minds of people for centuries. In *Some Answered Questions*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá unseals the main symbols of the story. Here they are:

Adam: spirit

Eve: soul

The tree of good and evil: the human world

Serpent: attachment to the human world

(More about the story of creation later. For full explanation, see *Some Answered Questions*, Chapter 30.)

Fire and Water, Bread and Blood

Let us review further examples from the Scriptures demonstrating the power of the concrete and the sensible. Here are some of the words discussed in this section: hunger, thirst, bread, flesh, blood, eating, drinking, feast, supper, fire, water, and city (or city of God).

The Symbolism of Food and Drink. A most common imagery used in the Scriptures has to do with food and drink:

If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. John 6:51

How can those who hunger and thirst be filled? Only by partaking of the food and drink that satisfy the spirit:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven... John 6:53

...he who eats me shall live... John 6:58 NEB

But where should the hungry ones eat the bread and the flesh, and the thirsty ones drink the blood? Only in a heavenly supper, a feast, or a wedding-Party:

Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God. Revelation 19:17

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:20

Happy the man who shall sit at the feast in the kingdom of God! Luke 14:15 NEB

Alleluia! The Lord our God, sovereign over all, has entered on his reign! Exult and shout for joy and do him homage, for the wedding-day of the Lamb has come!...Happy are those who are invited to the wedding-supper of the Lamb!✳ Revelation 19:6-9 NEB

Sometimes even the disciples misunderstood their Master:

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, have something to eat.’ But he said, ‘I have food to eat of which you know nothing.’ At this the disciples said to one another, ‘Can someone have brought him food?’ But Jesus said, ‘It is meat and drink for me to do the will of him who sent me until I have finished his work.’ John 4:31-34 NEB

The metaphor of heavenly food is used also in the Qur’án:

Jesus, Son of Mary, said: “O God, our God! Send down a table to us out of Heaven, that it may become a recurring festival to us...” Qur’án 5:115

Bahá’u’lláh describes the heavenly bread in these terms:

That which is preeminent above all other gifts, is...the gift of Divine Revelation. Every bounty conferred by the Creator upon man, be it material or spiritual, is subservient unto this. It is, in its essence, and will ever so remain, the Bread which cometh down from Heaven. It is God’s supreme testimony, the clearest evidence of His truth, the sign of His consummate bounty, the token of His all-encompassing mercy, the proof of His most loving providence, the symbol of His most perfect grace. He hath, indeed, partaken of this highest gift of God who hath recognized His Manifestation in this Day.²

And again:

✳ More about the meaning of Lamb, Bride, and Bridegroom later.

This is the food that conferreth everlasting life upon the pure in heart and the illumined in spirit.³

Jesus used similar words:

You must work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life. John 6:27 NEB

Another word used figuratively is blood. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

The blood also signifies the spirit of life and the divine perfections, the lordly splendor and eternal bounty. For all the members of the body gain vital substance from the circulation of the blood.⁴

The City of God. Another symbol similar to heavenly bread is the Holy City or the city of God, prophesied to descend from heaven:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Revelation 21:2 NIV

That City is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation.⁵ Bahá’u’lláh

In *The Book of Certitude* Bahá’u’lláh refers at length to the wonders of the city of God or the city of certitude. Here is part of His enchanting words:

In these cities spiritual sustenance is bountifully provided, and incorruptible delights have been ordained. The food they bestow is the bread of heaven, and the Spirit they impart is God’s imperishable blessing. Upon detached souls they bestow the gift of Unity, enrich the destitute, and offer the cup of knowledge unto them who wander in the wilderness of ignorance. All the guidance, the blessings, the learning, the understanding, the faith, and certitude, conferred upon all that is in heaven and on earth, are hidden and treasured within these Cities.⁶

Bahá’u’lláh also refers to the approximate timing of the future renewal of the city of God:

Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and re-adorned.⁷

(More about the biblical prophecies on the descent of the city of God, Jerusalem, and the renewal of the city, later.)

The Symbolism of Fire

Let us consider another symbol from the Scriptures. What did Jesus set out to accomplish? Here are His Words:

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Luke 12:49 NIV

What did Jesus mean by “fire”? Fire is a purifier (Isa. 6:6-7); it is also a spiritual power (Ps. 104:1-4), capable of generating warmth and love. Here is part of a prayer by Bahá’u’lláh using the metaphor of “the fire of love:”

Ignite, then, O my God, within my breast the fire of Thy love, that its flame may burn up all else except my remembrance of Thee, that every trace of corrupt desire may be entirely mortified within me, and that naught may remain except the glorification of Thy transcendent and all-glorious Being. This is my highest aspiration, mine ardent desire, O Thou Who rulest all things, and in Whose hand is the kingdom of the entire creation. Thou, verily, doest what Thou chooseth. No God is there beside Thee, the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the Ever-Forgiving.⁸

We discern an element of this fire in the words of John the Baptist, when he speaks of baptism with fire:

I baptize you with water; but there is one to come who is mightier than I. I am not fit to unfasten his shoes. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Luke 3:16 NEB

It is the warmth that these Luminaries of God generate, and the undying fires they kindle, which cause the light of the love of God to burn fiercely in the heart of humanity.⁹ Bahá’u’lláh

(See also *Paris Talks*, pp. 81-83.)

Fire, like religion, is pregnant with power. It activates the dormant capacities, uproots the old, and it puts everything to the test:

...the work that each man does will at last be brought to light; the day of judgment will expose it. For that day dawns in fire, and the fire will test the worth of each man’s work.

I Corinthians 3:13 NEB

We find an element of this raging fire of faith in the following words of Jesus:

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. Matthew 10:35

We also find an element of this “fire” in the following words of Bahá’u’lláh:

No sooner had that Revelation been unveiled to men’s eyes than the signs of universal discord appeared among the peoples of the world, and commotion seized the dwellers of earth and heaven, and the foundations of all things were shaken. The forces of dissension were released, the meaning of the Word was unfolded, and every several atom in all created things acquired its own distinct and separate character. Hell was made to blaze, and the delights of Paradise were uncovered to men’s eyes. Blessed is the man that turneth towards Thee, and woe betide him who standeth aloof from Thee...¹⁰

Often we find the divine power symbolized, in the Scriptures, as “fire.” For instance, God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2-3; 19:18). “For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).

We find several prophecies relating the Glory of God or the Glory of the Lord to fire, smoke and clouds. Here is part of a vision involving primarily fire:

Above the vault over their heads there appeared, as it were, a sapphire in the shape of a throne, and high above all, upon the throne, a form in human likeness. I saw what might have been brass glowing like fire in a furnace from the waist upwards; and from the waist downwards I saw what looked like fire with encircling radiance. Like a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day was the sight of that encircling radiance; it was like the appearance of the glory of the Lord. Ezekiel 1:26-28 NEB

The sun is veiled by clouds, fire by smoke. These symbols sometimes stand together to indicate the realities of creation. Here is a prophecy, from the Book of Revelation, relating to our time:

And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God,
and from his power...

Revelation 15:8

(More about “smoke” and “clouds” later.)

Here is a counsel to the believers asking them not to smother the “spirit’s fire,” by ignoring it, or failing to test it:

Do not put out the spirit’s fire, do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good.

I Thessalonians 5:19-21 NIV

Fire has two opposing potentials: it not only destroys, it gives life and light as well. It turns wood into smoke and ashes, iron into a glowing light. In the words of the Báb:

These verses, clear and conclusive, are a token of the mercy of thy Lord and a source of guidance for all mankind. They are a light unto those who believe in them and a fire of afflictive torment for those who turn away and reject them.¹¹

And in the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

This [the divine Message] is the fire which, in one and the same moment, kindleth the flame of love in the breasts of the faithful, and induceth the chill of heedlessness in the heart of the enemy.¹²

The inner meanings of the words of Christ (“I have come to set the world on fire.”) should by now be quite clear: we must put our old ways of thinking, our dogmas and prejudices to the test, set them on fire, so that the pure may stand and the impure perish. We must let the fire rage to the point of consuming all the barriers between us and our Beloved, including our loved ones who may stand in our way—parents, children, siblings, spouse, or anyone else. Once the barriers are removed, the impurities discarded, there remains only the fire of the love of God, which is the ultimate end of all aspirations, the goal of all endeavors.

The Symbolism of Hell-Fire. There is as yet one sort of fire we have not touched upon: hell-fire. Among all sorts of fire, hell-fire is the one that has caused the greatest confusion. The use of flaming fire as a means of punishment has bewildered believers for centuries. For it seems strange indeed that God would burn His sinful but

helpless creatures for ever, or place them before devouring worms with insatiable appetites.

The Bahá'í Scriptures unveil the symbolism of “fire” as used in many scriptures to portray divine punishment. Here are the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explaining the meaning of heaven and hell:

When they [people] are delivered through the light of faith from the darkness of these vices, and become illuminated with the radiance of the sun of reality, and ennobled with all the virtues, they esteem this the greatest reward, and they know it to be the true paradise. In the same way they consider that the spiritual punishment... is to be subjected to the world of nature; to be veiled from God; to be brutal and ignorant; to fall into carnal lusts... these are the greatest punishments and tortures.

... The rewards of the other world are the perfections and the peace obtained in the spiritual worlds after leaving this world, while the rewards of this life are the real luminous perfections which are realized in this world, and which are the cause of eternal life, for they are the very progress of existence. It is like the man who passes from the embryonic world to the state of maturity and becomes the manifestation of these words: “Blessed, therefore, be God, the most excellent of Makers.” The rewards of the other world are peace, the spiritual graces, the various spiritual gifts in the Kingdom of God, the gaining of the desires of the heart and the soul, and the meeting of God in the world of eternity. In the same way the punishments of the other world... consist in being deprived of the special divine blessings and the absolute bounties, and falling into the lowest degrees of existence. He who is deprived of these divine favors, although he continues after death, is considered as dead by the people of truth.¹³

The Báb explains the meaning of paradise and hell-fire in these terms:

Paradise is attainment of His good-pleasure and everlasting hell-fire His judgment through justice.¹⁴

Let us now examine the imagery of “fire” as a medium of punishment or deprivation. Fire has many qualities; it at once cleanses

and consumes the evil, while keeping its object (the soul) in burning desperation for the love of the Beloved—the source of all perfections, the goal of all aspirations. It is the burning desire to approach God and the consuming fire of nearness to all those deprived of divine perfections—love, charity, purity. In the words of the Báb:

...by Paradise is meant recognition of and submission unto Him Whom God shall make manifest [Bahá'u'lláh], and by the fire the company of such souls as would fail to submit unto Him or to be resigned to His good-pleasure.¹⁵

And in the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Whoso hath failed to recognize Him [the Redeemer of the age] will have condemned himself to the misery of remoteness, a remoteness which is naught but utter nothingness and the essence of the nethermost fire. Such will be his fate, though to outward seeming he may occupy the earth's loftiest seats and be established upon its most exalted throne.¹⁶

Jesus foretold that such a consuming fire would indeed rage at His second advent, “at the end of time,” namely our time:

...at the end of time the Son of Man will send out his angels, who will gather out of his kingdom whatever makes men stumble, and all whose deeds are evil, and these will be thrown into the blazing furnace, the place of wailing and grinding of teeth. And then the righteous will shine as brightly as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. If you have ears, then hear. Matthew 13:40-43 NEB

The Symbolism of Water. Not only “fire” and “food” but their counterpart “water” as well is used symbolically. Both bread and water symbolize spiritual sustenance, the divine counsels. For instance, John the Baptist meant such a baptism when he spoke of baptism with water (Luke 3:16). Here is a reference clarifying the true meaning of baptism:

Baptism is not the washing away of bodily pollution, but the appeal made to God by a good conscience... I Peter 3:21 NEB

The woman to whom Jesus spoke was confused, and she said:

...give me that water, and then I shall not be thirsty, nor have to come all this way to draw. John 4:15 NEB

Since that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:6), only the Spiritual can stir the spirit. It is “the living water,” (John 4:10-15) not the earthly, that gives life and enchants the human essence.

O MY SERVANT!

Abandon not for that which perisheth an everlasting dominion, and cast not away celestial sovereignty for a worldly desire.

This is the river of everlasting life that hath flowed from the well-spring of the pen of the merciful; well is it with them that drink!¹⁷

Bahá'u'lláh

The following prophecies from the Book of Revelation and from Zechariah are specifically addressed to us:

“Come!” say the Spirit and the bride. “Come!” let each hearer reply. Come forward, you who are thirsty; accept the water of life, a free gift to all who desire it.

Revelation 22:17 NEB

On that day living water shall issue from Jerusalem, half flowing to the eastern sea and half to the western, in summer and winter alike. Then the Lord shall become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one Lord and his name the one name.

Zechariah 14:8-9 NEB

To Summarize

- The literal language is best suited, and is used primarily, for the expression of specific facts or rules requiring application.
- The symbolic language serves many purposes. The purposes discussed here were (a) to enhance or enrich the expression of moral-spiritual values, (b) to simplify complex philosophical questions, and (c) to emphasize or make concrete certain religious precepts or practices.

Let us conclude the present discussion with a prayer from Bahá'u'lláh referring to the One manifested by God as both Water and Fire:

Glorified, immeasurably glorified be Thy name, O my God! How can I ever befittingly mention Thee or sufficiently praise Thee, that Thou hast manifested Him by the power of Thy might... How bewilderingly mysterious, moreover, O my God, is His nature and all that Thou hast infused into Him, through

Thy strength and by the power of Thy might! At one time He appeareth as the water which is Life indeed, sent down out of the heaven of Thy grace, and poured forth from the clouds of Thy mercy, that Thy creatures may be endued with new life, and live as long as Thine own Kingdom endureth. Every drop of that water would suffice to quicken the dead, and to set their faces in the direction of Thy favors and Thy gifts, and to rid them of all attachment to aught else except Thee. At another time He revealeth Himself as the Fire which Thou didst kindle in the tree of Thy unity, whose heat melted the hearts of Thine ardent lovers...I testify, O my God, that through Him the veils of human fancy were burnt up, and the hearts of men were set towards the scene of Thy most resplendent glory.¹⁸

7

Symbolism as a Means of Dramatizing Prophetic Meanings

Symbolism serves still other purposes, among them to embody precepts that predict the future. As with moral-spiritual values, sometimes symbolism is used simply to make a prophetic sign more impressive or memorable. Let us review a few examples demonstrating such a use.

The Symbolism of the Thief in the Night

A most vivid and striking symbolism used to portray the advent of the Savior is that of “the thief in the night:”

Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Revelation 3:3 NIV

...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

I Thessalonians 5:2 NIV

Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.

Revelation 16:15 NIV

No imagery could stir the imagination more vividly. Often on reading or hearing this prophetic sign, I am reminded of the time when as a child I was awakened by the uproar of a crowd in front of our house, knocking at the door and shouting “thief, thief!” The crowd was anxious to tell us that one of the two thieves who had broken into our house had been captured by the watchmen.

Here is how it all happened. The thieves had found us sleeping outdoors, unaware, and away from the valuables. They had selected a time when we were in deep sleep, had dislodged heavy metal bars protecting the window, and entered the house barefoot and in dark uniform. They were prepared, we were not. But fortunately for us, the watchmen (because of frequent break-ins in the neighborhood) had kept a close watch, thereby receiving their rewards in full measure: capturing one of the thieves full-handed.

This incident, as insignificant or commonplace as it may seem, portrays a vital prophetic truth: it perfectly matches and exemplifies the memorable words of Jesus indicating how He would come again. No other imagery could more vividly and realistically portray the Advent of the Lord.

In the deep silence and darkness of the night, when a thief chooses to come, not only are the people asleep, they don’t have enough clothes on, either. So even if they awaken, they are unprepared to pursue the thief, for fear of being found naked. And by the time they are prepared, it may be too late. “The thief” has come “from above” and stolen their worthiest and most prized possession: their faith.

To avoid being taken by the thief, they must meet two basic requirements: first to stay awake, and second to keep their clothes on.

The Symbolism of Clothing

Garments stand for human qualities. As the human temple is protected and adorned by garments, so is the human spirit by divine attributes or virtues. Courage to break the bonds of conformity, detachment from worldly wishes, thirst for truth,

patience and persistence in search, absolute trust in the supreme Sovereign—these are spiritual attires, attributes that adorn and exalt every pure and enchanted soul.

Here are once again the words of Christ (spoken through John the Revelator) asking us to be prepared:

So I advise you to buy from me...white clothes to put on to hide the shame of your nakedness... Revelation 3:18-19 NEB

White symbolizes purity; those near and dear to God dress themselves in white (Rev. 7:19, 13-14).

Here is a rare instance where a symbol is clearly defined:

Now the fine linen signifies the righteous deeds of God's people. Revelation 19:8 NEB

Christ speaks again:

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:5-6 NIV

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh use words such as raiment, robe, or clothing to convey the same meaning. Here are the words of the Báb:

How great the number of people who deck themselves with robes of silk all their lives, while clad in the garb of fire, inasmuch as they have divested themselves of the raiment of divine guidance and righteousness; and how numerous are those who wear clothes made of cotton or coarse wool throughout their lives, and yet by reason of their being endowed with the vesture of divine guidance and righteousness, are truly attired with the raiment of Paradise and take delight in the good-pleasure of God. Indeed it would be better in the sight of God were ye to combine the two, adorning yourselves with the raiment of divine guidance and righteousness and wearing exquisite silk, if ye can afford to do so.¹

And here are the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

O CHILDREN OF DESIRE!

Put away the garment of vainglory, and divest yourselves of the attire of haughtiness.²

The Symbolism of Sleep

The analogy of coming like a thief and watching for the thief is quite simple and striking, and it is repeated several times (by such diverse sources as Peter and Paul as well as Matthew, Luke, and John the Revelator), yet it has never been taken seriously by the expecting but slumbering masses. This is not surprising, for the prophecies predict that in the latter days the masses of mankind will be overtaken by a deep sleep. Here are the words of Isaiah foretelling the mood of our time with marvelous precision:

For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep,
and hath closed your eyes... Isaiah 29:10

Daniel prophesies the coming of Michael (who is like God), the great Prince (the Prince of Peace), at a time of utter spiritual darkness when many are asleep, some of whom awaken “to everlasting life, and some to everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:1-2).

Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly confirms such a prevailing spirit:

The peoples of the world are fast asleep. Were they to wake from their slumber, they would hasten with eagerness unto God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.³

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh seek again and again to awaken the conscience of the sleepers. In the words of the Báb:

These are the glorious days on the like of which the sun hath never risen in the past. These are the days which the people in bygone times eagerly expected. What hath then befallen you that ye are fast asleep?⁴

And in the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

O SON OF MAN!

Many a day hath passed over thee whilst thou hast busied thyself with thy fancies and idle imaginings. How long art thou to slumber

on thy bed? Lift up thy head from slumber, for the Sun hath risen to the zenith, haply it may shine upon thee with the light of beauty.⁵

And again:

Speed out of your sepulchers. How long will ye sleep? The second blast hath been blown on the trumpet. On whom are ye gazing? This is your Lord, the God of Mercy. Witness how ye gainsay His signs!⁶

Great is the blessedness that awaiteth him who hath been awakened from his sleep by the breath of God which, from the source of His mercy, hath blown over all such of His creatures as have set themselves towards Him!⁷

The Scriptures, too, seek again and again to encourage a spirit of wakefulness in the believers:

We do not belong to night or darkness, and we must not sleep like the rest, but keep awake and sober. Sleepers sleep at night, and drunkards are drunk at night, but we, who belong to daylight, must keep sober... I Thessalonians 5:5-8 NEB

The same mood of sleepiness prevailed during the time of Jesus. The following hymn from the Gospel testifies:

Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you. Ephesians 5:14 NEB

Here is another prophecy using symbolism to point to the temper of our time:

I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. Amos 8:11

The Parable of the Banquet of the Kingdom

There is another prophecy couched in parable, predicting the unawareness of the people of our age, namely their preoccupation with worldly cares. The prophecy truly reflects the mood and the

temper of our time; it speaks to all those who are too busy with just making a living to take their due share of the living waters of divine Bounties, and too preoccupied with earthly bread to partake of the heavenly bread, the food that descends from above.

The prophetic parable relates that a man was having a great feast to which he invited many guests. At the time of the feast he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, "Come, for everything is ready now." Did the invited guests come? No, they all had their special excuses. So the master of the house got angry and asked his servant to bring others into the banquet, saying, "that not one of those who were invited shall taste my banquet" (Luke 14:15-24 NEB).

This parable was spoken by Jesus after hearing one of His companions refer to the Kingdom of God, and Event whose advent He had come to foretell and whose realization He had always associated with His return. As we shall see later, the message contained in this parable stands in perfect harmony not only with the prophecies already mentioned, but also with many other Scriptural messages pointing to the temper of our time (Matt. 25:1-3; 22:11-12; Luke 12:35-46).

A similar version of the preceding prophecy may be found in Matthew (about a king who prepares a feast for his son's wedding), with an additional passage:

When the king came in to see the company at table, he observed one man who was not dressed for a wedding. "My friend," said the king, "how do you come to be here without your wedding clothes?" He had nothing to say. The king then said to his attendants, "Bind him hand and foot; turn him out into the dark, the place of wailing and grinding of teeth." For though many are invited, few are chosen. Matthew 22:11-14 NEB

Here not only the main message of the parable but also the kind of punishment inflicted on the unprepared is expressed through symbolism. "The place of wailing and grinding of teeth" stands for hell. This phrase appears in many passages in the Gospel to emphasize divine punishment by making it sensible, vivid, and striking. As mentioned, one aspect of hell is remoteness from God,

and the other nearness to the unrighteous, those deprived of divine Virtues. (See the words of the Báb quoted earlier.)

Another passage in the Book of Revelation uses symbolism to indicate not only the punishment of those who are spiritually unprepared (lacking courage to taste of the new wine of divine Revelation), but also the reward of those who thirst for truth. The reward promised is “A draught from the water-springs of life” (Rev. 21:6 NEB), and the punishment death “in the lake that burns with sulphurous flames” (Rev 21:8 NEB). The words “water” and “fire” have already been examined; the word “death” will be the subject of study later.

From the many examples provided, it becomes evident that symbolism plays a key role in the prophetic words. As we shall see later, it serves the prophecies in other ways as well. The examples presented in this section demonstrate only one of many roles symbolism plays: namely its use as a means of emphasizing the prophetic words by making them more vivid, memorable, and striking.

8

Symbolism as a Means of Concealing Prophetic Meanings

The Book is Closed

In the Holy Scriptures, symbolism finds one more vital use: it serves as a veil with which to conceal prophetic meanings: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden from of old” (Ps. 78:2 NIV). So spoke the Psalmist, making manifest one of the mysteries of divine Wisdom. Jesus continued the practice of speaking in parables, thereby confirming and fulfilling the preceding prophecy:

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables, and he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

Matthew 13:34-35 NIV

The practice of speaking in symbolic language continued in the Islámic Revelation. The Qur’án contains many parables, metaphors, and mysteries, a fact confirmed in the Qur’án itself:

...God setteth forth parables to men...

Qur’án 24:35

It is intriguing to note that all the great Messengers have kept certain truths sealed and secret, but prophesied that they would be divulged at “the time of the end,” when the Lord of Hosts comes. Some of these truths are non-prophetic; they encompass almost the

whole spectrum of human knowledge. Others relate to the signs of “the last Day:”

Till now I have been using figures of speech; a time is coming when I shall no longer use figures, but tell you of the Father in plain words. John 16:25-26 NEB

But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. Daniel 12:4

And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried; but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand.* Daniel 12:8-10

The Book Is Opened

The author of Revelation repeatedly refers to the opening of “the Book” as one of the events unfolding in his visions:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David [the Redeemer of our time], has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Revelation 5:1-5 NIV

See also Rev. 5:9-10; 6:1-17; 8:1; 10:1-8; 20:11-12; 22:10; Daniel 7:9-10; II Peter 1:20

* This prophecy does not imply that the wise shall understand all the mysteries. Chapter 12 of Daniel is devoted entirely to the signs of “the time of the end.” What the prophecy indicates is that the wise shall, from the signs given, recognize the nearness of the dawn of the Redeemer; provided they will not sleep, but stay awake (verse 2).

The Qur'án reaffirms the same theme:

And now have we brought them the Book...What have they to wait for now but its interpretation? Qur'án 7:50-51

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh declare to have “unsealed” the mysteries kept secret since the dawn of history. Here are the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

The seal of the choice Wine of His Revelation hath, in this Day and in His Name, the Self-Sufficing, been broken. Its grace is being poured out upon men. Fill thy cup, and drink in, in His Name, the Most Holy, the All-Praised.¹

And again:

Through Him hath appeared that which had been hidden from time immemorial and been veiled from the eyes of men.²

Thou hast laid bare what had from eternity been wrapped up within the Tabernacle of Thy majesty, Thine omnipotence and glory, and through which Thou hadst decked forth the heaven of Thy Revelation and adorned the pages of the book of Thy testimony.³

To cite an example, all the previous Messengers have referred to the human soul, to a life beyond this life, to hell and heaven, without ever providing any elaboration or explanation. Now we have a whole volume in English from the Bahá'í scriptures on the reality and immortality of the human soul. (See *The Glorious Journey to God*.)

Another example: all the Messengers have referred to resurrection, the Day of Judgment, the rising of the dead, without ever fully explaining them. The mystery was destined to remain sealed until the dawn of the new age.

To summarize, the examples so far provided demonstrate the many ways symbols enrich and adorn the language. Briefly, they serve to make values or virtues more memorable; they simplify scientific, philosophical, or literary concepts; they emphasize prophetic precepts; and they conceal meanings.

Why Conceal Knowledge?

Among the many functions of symbolism, perhaps the most mysterious is its use as a means of concealing knowledge. Let us now see why should the book be sealed and the truths concealed. First, a few words of introduction.

Progressive Revelation of Truth. The divine Teachers bestow the truth and unveil the mysteries progressively, according to the maturity of the receivers. To reveal knowledge when the receivers cannot “bear” it, and to withhold when they can, are contrary to God’s Wisdom. This is the essence and the basis of “the principle of the progressive revelation.” As soon as we can absorb more truths, God gives us more.

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.

I Corinthians 3:2 NIV
See also Isa. 29:9-10

It was in reference to this same principle that Jesus prophesied saying:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth...

John 16:12-13 NIV
See also John 14:25-26

Bahá’u’lláh confirms the words of Christ:

It hath been decreed by Us that the Word of God and all the potentialities thereof shall be manifested unto men in strict conformity with such conditions as have been foreordained by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise...Should the Word be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a Revelation.⁴

As soon as humanity attained the stage of maturity, a new revelation of truth dawned upon the world:

No sooner had mankind attained the stage of maturity, than the Word revealed to men’s eyes the latent energies with which it had been endowed...⁵

Even today in spite of our maturity, we are unable to gaze upon the Ancient Beauty (one of Bahá'u'lláh's titles) with all its splendor, to know the many mysteries as yet unveiled. Bahá'u'lláh refers repeatedly to such mysteries:

Know verily that the veil hiding Our countenance hath not been completely lifted. We have revealed Our Self to a degree corresponding to the capacity of the people of Our age. Should the Ancient Beauty be unveiled in the fullness of His glory mortal eyes would be blinded by the dazzling intensity of His revelation.⁶

And again:

By God! This Bird of Heaven, now dwelling upon the dust, can, besides these melodies, utter a myriad songs, and is able, apart from these utterances, to unfold innumerable mysteries. Every single note of its unpronounced utterances is immeasurably exalted above all that hath already been revealed, and immensely glorified beyond that which hath streamed from this Pen. Let the future disclose the hour when the Brides of inner meaning, will, as decreed by the Will of God, hasten forth, unveiled, out of their mystic mansions, and manifest themselves in the ancient realm of being.⁷

Thus when truths are veiled, mysteries withheld, it is because of the inability of the receivers to grasp their inner essence.

Why Conceal Prophetic Signs?

Among the truths provided us are the prophetic signs pointing to the advent of the succeeding revelations. These signs are commonly cast into the mold of symbols, for divine Wisdom ordains that they remain “sealed” or secret until the dawn of the advent of the expected Redeemer draws near. Before the appointed time approaches, people need not, and should not, become unduly preoccupied with the prophetic signs. As divine Wisdom ordains, only when the appointed time approaches—not sooner—the seals begin to break, unveiling their inner meanings. Seekers begin to see what they could not see before, even like a child who rises to a new awareness as soon as

he gains maturity. And so as it is true with the unfolding of any other reality or mystery in the universe, the fruits of the prophecies can ripen only with time.

The second reason the prophecies are kept veiled (within symbols) is to honor human freedom. For divine Wisdom demands that humans partake of the freedom of choice ordained for them, and that no one be forced to believe without his own ardent desire, and his own sincere efforts. The earth is God's crucible of testing; it is His great touchstone. Here the soul has the choice to test itself, to prove itself, to choose between the mortal and immortal, the passions of the flesh and the aspirations of the spirit, descent into the temptations of the world and ascent to heavenly horizon. With almost unlimited freedom, it can readily prove its purity and sincerity; it can cling to the earthly cage or wing its flight to the Kingdom above; it can rise to the heavenly horizons or fall to the depths of despair and dishonor.

Therefore, to find the truth, the seeker must strive to decode the symbols, to discern that which is "the most hidden of the hidden" and "the most manifest of the manifest," hidden to those asleep with a dormant mind; manifest to those awake with an inquisitive mind.

To him who seeks with a mind pure and a vision unhampered, the divine Messenger radiates with such an intensity as to bedim the most luminous lights of the universe; to him who "seeks" with a mind attached and a vision obscured and hampered, the glittering rays escape and hide beyond the veil of concealment—the clouds of dogmatism, superstition, conformity, strict loyalty to outworn traditions, stale doctrines, and blind beliefs.

Truth seeks and finds only the receptive, the prepared, never subduing the unprepared; it knocks at the door, but never enters without a receptive call, concealing its countenance from all the strangers.

It is certainly within God's power to make everyone a perfect believer, but forced obedience stands contrary to divine Wisdom. In the Words of the Báb:

Should it be Our wish, it is in Our power to compel, through the agency of but one letter of Our Revelation, the world and all that is therein to recognize, in less than the twinkling of an eye, the truth of Our Cause.⁸

And in the Words of Bahá'u'lláh:

He Who is the Day Spring of Truth is, no doubt, fully capable of rescuing from such remoteness wayward souls and of causing them to draw nigh unto His court and attain His Presence. "If God had pleased He had surely made all men one people." His purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward and perverse. Thus hath it been ordained by the all-glorious and resplendent Pen.⁹

No wonder when Daniel was having his vision of the last days, the angel Gabriel told him that among the many who are tried, only "the wise shall understand" the intent of the prophecies (Daniel 12:10). In every age it is the wise who first discern the truth: those who watch with the wonder and curiosity of the child, who seek like the one in search of his beloved, who pursue the truth with unflinching courage, without ever tiring or fearing the consequences.

Wisdom does not rise out of academic knowledge; it is a gift bestowed on the heart of the pure. It is a heavenly light that penetrates all mysteries. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Seek with all your hearts this Heavenly Light, so that you may be enabled to understand the realities, that you may know the secret things of God, that the hidden ways may be made plain before your eyes.

This light may be likened unto a mirror, and as a mirror reflects all that is before it, so this Light shows to the eyes of our spirits all that exists in God's Kingdom and causes the realities of things to be made visible. By the help of this effulgent Light all the spiritual interpretation of the Holy Writings has been made plain, the hidden things of God's Universe have become manifest, and we have been enabled to comprehend the divine purposes for man.¹⁰

Thus we see how God as our supreme Teacher and Educator constantly “tests our hearts” (I Thess. 2:4). He “conceals” the truth and then calls upon us to find it. His wish is simply to test us, to try our wisdom, our openness to new truths, our courage to face new challenges, our purity from worldly cares. If He ever wished to remove the veil, to enforce the truth, He certainly would have the power to do so. In the words of the Báb:

I hold within My grasp whatsoever any man might wish of the good of this world and of the next. Were I to remove the veil, all would recognize Me as their Best Beloved, and no one would deny Me.¹¹

And in the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

Were the mysteries, that are known to none except God, to be unraveled, the whole of mankind would witness the evidences of perfect and consummate justice. With a certitude that none can question, all men would cleave to His commandments, and would scrupulously observe them. We, verily, have decreed in Our Book a goodly and bountiful reward to whosoever will turn away from wickedness and lead a chaste and godly life. He, in truth, is the Great Giver, the All-Bountiful.¹²

The same principle prevails in the scientific realm. Our Creator conceals not only spiritual truths but scientific truths as well. The challenge of discovering new knowledge continues to be one of God’s greatest gifts to us. What would happen to a child, if he were born with all the things he needs to do and to know? How much would he miss the pleasure of growing and learning.

So we may ask: why should the expected Messenger come “like a thief in the night”? Simply to reward and to distinguish from others those who have enough faith in Him to follow His command: “Watch!” (Matt. 24:42), enough faith to stay awake, to seek Him, to see Him, to find Him, and to follow Him.

All this leads us to a most fundamental theme in religion: namely, the necessity of testing or being tested. If this theme is not adequately understood and appreciated, nothing in human existence can make any sense. Let us now explore this fundamental point, around which revolve the understanding of divine Wisdom as well as human destiny.

9

Man On Trial

The Necessity of Being Tested

“What is man...that thou should try him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18). As Job asked long ago: why should God test us, put us on trial, every moment, all the days of our lives? Recognizing the necessity and the purpose of testing is a key to the understanding of religion and the divine purpose in creating humankind. Without this knowledge nothing can make sense.

Testing is carried out not only through misfortune but good fortune as well. The Qur’án refers to both mediums:

We try you with evil and good for a testing. Qur’án 21:36 A

Testing as a Means of Measuring Human’s Sense of Responsibility

It was stated earlier that because of our inherent freedom as well as our knowledge of right and wrong (granted by the Messengers), we stand accountable for our acts. If this is the case, then there must be ways through which our accountability or responsibility is measured. These ways are called tests. Testing is a means of indicating our worthiness and sincerity, of showing the extent to which we live up to our duties and obligations.

Since we honor our duties in varying measures (some of us ignore them, others fully or partially fulfill them), God wishes to sift us, to separate us into grades, even as a teacher does. Testing is the means of doing this.

We are tested basically in two ways: by our deeds and by our faith, by what we do and what we think or believe. In the realm of deeds, we encounter an ever-increasing array of temptations, which we must learn to curb or cope with. Though usually unrecognized, we encounter similar tests or temptations in the realm of faith and beliefs as well. Faced with a tragedy or failure we question our faith in God; asked to seek the Message of a new Redeemer, we wonder if the security of our own religion is not preferable to the challenge of the unfamiliar, or if the time required for the search for truth could not be spent more profitably in the pursuit of material gains or pleasures. Thus, God has ordained that we get what we seek and what we deserve, either worldly or spiritual riches, depending on our choice.

God's Wisdom ordains that each soul manifest its inner motives—its purity or impurity, its sincerity or insincerity. Under the covering of darkness, everything hides beneath the seal of concealment. Then the sun rises and removes the seal, stirring the hidden powers to unfold—all powers, both good and evil. Two seeds, seemingly identical, preserve their outward identity until offered an opportunity to unfold their potential—one growing into tare and thistle, the other blooming into such beauty as to defy description.

The seed sown on rock stands for those who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but have no root; they are believers for a while, but in the time of testing they desert. Luke 8:13-14 NEB

For there is nothing hidden that will not become public, nothing under cover that will not be made known and brought into the open. Luke 8:17 NEB

When the Scriptures declare that:

He had blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them. John 12:40 NIV

The implied message is not that God tempts anyone into unbelief, but that He raises the station of faith or belief in Himself and His Messengers to such heights as to be accessible only to the deserving, exactly as a teacher who sets standards for his tests by making them so difficult as to be passed only by the prepared students.

Those who pretend purity and perfection must be challenged, tested and tried, to prove themselves. A skeptic reads a symbolic passage from the Scriptures, one that does not fit into his conceptions—more accurately preconceptions—of truth. He sets the book aside, calling it superstition. He is so sure of his infallibility (in spite of evidence against it) that he passes immediate judgment, before taking time to examine all the evidence. Has he passed his test? To pass a test in philosophy or physics, he invests untold hours; to pass from the fleeting dominion to the eternal, he invests none. Is he deserving of the rewards of recognition, the gift of knowledge, the serenity of certitude? An unprepared student can claim knowledge until tested and proved wanting. To realize itself or attain its potential, everything must pass through the crucible of testing. Testing aids each soul to attain its due position in the scheme of evolution.

...from time immemorial even unto eternity the Almighty hath tried, and will continue to try, His servants, so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns.¹ Bahá'u'lláh

Even after we profess faith or belief, considering ourselves God's favorite, we are still not exempt from the tests. Here are the words of the Qur'án, quoted by Bahá'u'lláh at the end of the preceding passage:

Think men that when they say 'we believe,' they shall be let alone and not be put to proof? Qur'án 29:2

As the Scriptures declare:

Even gold passes through the assayer's fire, and more precious than perishable gold is faith which has stood the test. These trials come so that your faith may prove itself worthy of all praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

I Peter 1:7 NEB
See also James 1:12-15

Even the divine Messengers are put to the test:

Stay awake, and pray that you may be spared the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Matthew 26:41

As the Scriptures testify Abraham too faced the divine tests (Heb. 11:17), a fact confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 75-76, 11-12).

Tests as a Means of Growing

We should realize that the tests are for our good. First, by separating us into grades, they allow justice to prevail; second, they allow and encourage the best in us to unfold; and third, they make us aware of our weakness and inadequacies; they awaken us, warn us, and stir us into action. For unless proved wanting, weak, or incapable, our egos may grow untamed and unchecked to the crest of egotism and haughtiness. In spite of emptiness and impurity, we may go on deceiving ourselves, pretending purity, power, and nobility.

If we attune ourselves to divine Wisdom, tests and trials, instead of weakening, will strengthen us, instead of demeaning, will edify us. They will teach us patience, trust, and endurance. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Such things [tests] take place only that the souls of men may develop and be delivered from the prison-cage of self and desire. Otherwise, that ideal King hath, throughout eternity, been in His Essence independent of the comprehension of all beings, and will continue, for ever, in His own Being to be exalted above the adoration of every soul. A single breeze of His affluence doth suffice to adorn all mankind with the robe of wealth; and one drop out of the ocean of His bountiful grace is enough to confer upon all beings the glory of everlasting life. But inasmuch as the divine Purpose hath decreed that the true

should be known from the false, and the sun from the shadow, He hath, therefore, in every season sent down upon mankind the showers of tests from His realm of glory.*²

God's Saviors, a Means of Testing

One way God tests us is through His Saviors. Jesus stood as a means of testing:

The child's [Jesus'] father and mother were full of wonder at what was being said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'This child is destined to be a sign which men reject; and you too shall be pierced to the heart. Many in Israel will stand or fall because of him, and thus the secret thoughts of many will be laid bare' [emphasis added].

Luke 2:33-35 NEB

The Promised One of our age is also prophesied to serve as a means of testing:

So pass no premature judgment; wait until the Lord comes. For he will bring to light what darkness hides, and disclose men's inward motives [emphasis added]... I Corinthians 4:5 NEB

The testing always reaches its most severe stage, its most trying moment, at the early days of the dawn of the new Messengers, when their Faith has gained no honor in the eyes of the masses, and may demand detachment from both the cares of the world and the criticism of the people.

According to Bahá'í beliefs, ours is such a time. For we are called upon to recognize the new Sun with a new name, risen from a new dawning point. To move against the tide of tradition and to sacrifice security of being in the majority is an awesome challenge. How we respond to this challenge is our test.

* See also James 1:2-4.

Severe Tests Ordained for Us

Ours is a critical time referred to again and again throughout the Scriptures. It is a time when “many...shall be tried” (Daniel 12:10); “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (Rev. 3:10 NIV); a trying time to which the voice of prophecy refers again and again:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver...*
Malachi 3:1-3 NIV

The New Testament confirms the severe tests predicted in the Old:

He then dismissed the people, and went into the house, where his disciples came to him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the darnel in the field.’ And this was his answer: ‘The sower of the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world; the good seed stands for the children of the Kingdom, the darnel for the children of the evil one. The enemy who sowed the darnel is the devil. The harvest is the end of time. The reapers are angels. As the darnel, then, is gathered up and burnt, so at the end of time the Son of Man will send out his angels, who will gather out of his kingdom whatever makes men stumble, and all whose deeds are evil, and these will be thrown into the blazing furnace, the place of wailing and grinding of teeth. And then the righteous will shine as brightly as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. If you have ears, then hear.’
Matthew 13:36-43 NEB

And again:

...the work that each man does will at last be brought to light; the day of judgment will expose it. For that day dawns in fire,

* For a detailed interpretation of this prophecy, please refer to Volume II.

and the fire will test the worth of each man's work.

I Corinthians 3:13-14 NEB

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh proclaim that their words are the crucible of testing. They separate the sincere from the insincere, the open-minded from the closed-minded:

These verses, clear and conclusive, are a token of the mercy of thy Lord and a source of guidance for all mankind. They are a light unto those who believe in them and a fire of afflictive torment for those who turn away and reject them.³ The Báb

The chief prayer recorded from the words of Jesus contains five basic points. One of the five is this: "lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13), or according to a new translation, "And do not bring us to the test" (NEB). The inclusion of this message in the prayer points to its significance. What we mean by the prayer is this: "O God, allow us not to be put to the test for which we are unprepared." Or: "Allow us not to do poorly on our tests." In other words, the Scripture is saying: "Pray that you may be spared the hour of testing" (Luke 22:40 NEB). The two basic elements of the prayer namely "seeking the coming of the Kingdom (Thy Kingdom come)" and "wishing not to be brought to the test" are intimately related. Many scriptural passages point to their close connection.

The Báb points to prophecies of the previous Messengers, reminding us of their prediction that severe tests and trials have been ordained for us:

How numerous the verses which have been revealed concerning the grievous tests ye shall experience on the Day of Judgment, yet it appeareth that ye have never perused them; and how vast the number of revealed traditions regarding the trials which will overtake you on the Day of Our Return, and yet ye seem never to have set your eyes upon them.⁴

Let us pray that we will be able to face up to our spiritual tests, and let us strive to persevere to the end. For "he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. 24:13). And let us recognize that compared to the small sacrifices we make in seeking the Spirit

of truth and in honoring the divine commandments, the rewards granted are incomparable:

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the victor's crown, the life God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12 NIV

To Conclude:

Understanding the necessity of testing is absolutely essential to the understanding of religion. Testing emphasizes and confirms the concept of freedom, the hallmark of human distinction; and it indicates that, contrary to common expectation, the gift of faith is never forced on us by spectacular means. If faith were to prove itself by drama and the sheer power of the miraculous, then the opportunity for testing and being tested would be completely taken away from us, and along with it our cherished freedom and responsibility.

10

The Means of Testing

Symbolic Language, a Means of Testing

As stated, God tests us in many ways and at many times, but especially through His Messengers and at the dawn of new dispensations. Let us now see specifically how He does this.

A most common way God puts us to the test is by speaking to us through parables, metaphors, allegories, or symbols. The symbolic words are trying words; they test our sincerity, purity of motives, and receptivity to the divine call. They separate those who use their supreme gift of reason to recognize the truth, and those who use it to rationalize their rejection. Bahá'u'lláh declares:

Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time immemorial such hath been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books.¹

And again:

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled;

that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion... The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed. ✨²

The recognition of every skill or proficiency requires special mediums or means of testing. Symbols constitute a most essential and fundamental means for measuring the seekers' sensitivity to the sacred words, their openness to the interpretation offered by the new Messenger.

Since a parable or symbol can be perceived in so many ways, the seeker has the privilege of finding in its obscure image something akin to his own perception of truth and in harmony with his own motives and desires, thereby projecting his own self into the unstructured, unbound, or ethereal reality. An open-minded seeker, once confronted with the fallacy of his thinking, immediately changes his perception, but a closed-minded seeker stands veiled by his fancies, suppositions, and prejudices.

Perceiving a symbolic truth is quite like perceiving a piece of abstract painting. Every soul derives from the unstructured reality that which it deserves or it can "bear." The following words of Jesus are indeed illuminating:

The disciples went up to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' He replied, 'It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven; but to those others it has not been granted. For the man who has will be given more, till he has enough and to spare; and the man who has not will forfeit even what he has. That is why I speak to them in parables; for they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding.

Matthew 13:10-14 NEB
See also Mark 4:10-12

As Jesus implies, the disciples had the capacity to discern "the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven." But what about the objectors

✨ See also *The Book of Certitude*, pp. 111-112 and 76-77.

and accusers—the blind in spirit? They did not deserve, “and it was not granted to them,” to discern the ethereal truths concealed within the mold of the symbols. Thus to those already rich in wisdom, to those willing to rise above their selfish concerns or immediate interests, new riches were given and new mysteries revealed: an opportunity to derive from every parable a fresh truth, an uplifting meaning with which to exalt their vision and enrich their wisdom. To those poor in wisdom and bound by conformity, to those unwilling to look beyond the boundaries of their bias—no new mysteries were revealed, no heavenly riches bestowed. Because of their closed-mindedness and hence their denial of divine truth, they were made even poorer: they lost even the little opportunity they had for edifying and uplifting their languished souls.

Since the disciples were worthy and capable of grasping greater truths, Jesus sometimes explained to them in private the inner meaning of the parables:

With many such parables he would give them message, so far as they were able to receive it. He never spoke to them except in parables; but privately to his disciples he explained everything.

Mark 4:33-34 NEB

The unreceptive were left to themselves to interpret the parables in their own way. If their hearts harbored evil, they saw and found something evil in the parable, something to object to, something with which to support and sustain their prejudices.

The following passage from the Qur’án further confirms and clarifies the words of Christ quoted earlier:

He it is who hath sent down to thee “the Book.” Some of its signs are of themselves perspicuous [clear, lucid]:—these are the basis of the Book—and others are figurative. But they whose hearts are given to err, follow its figures, craving discord, craving an interpretation; yet none knoweth its interpretation but God.

Qur’án 3:5

And again:

Many will He mislead by such parables and many guide: but none will He mislead thereby except the wicked... Qur’án 2:24

To Conclude:

The symbolic words of the Messengers bestow freedom upon the seekers of divine mysteries, the freedom to see or not to see, to be subdued by conformity and complacency or to rise above and beyond all barriers. They separate the open-minded from the obstinate, the liberal-minded from the literal-minded, the humble and the meek from the proud and the self-righteous (Matt. 13:30). They put people's sincerity to the test, a test so taxing and severe that in the early days of the dawn of the new Revelations, only a few can successfully confront it. This is why "out of the many who are called," so few are chosen (Matt. 20:16). They are chosen because they manifest motives that make them deserving of the rewards of recognition. In sum, the symbols aid every seeker to attain his due position in the scheme of human evolution.

Examples of symbols used in the Scriptures in relation to our age, and interpreted by Bahá'u'lláh in His *Book of Certitude*, will appear in the following chapters.

The Seeming Lowliness of the Redeemer, a Means of Testing

Besides using symbols, there are still other ways by which God tests our sincerity in our search for truth. One way is the seeming lowliness of the Messengers. For God sends His Messengers as lowly and humble individuals, destitute of earthly power and glory. How was Jesus viewed by His contemporaries? Here is how: "he was counted among the outlaws" (Luke 22:37 NEB). Let us imagine for a moment how we would react if we heard or thought an outlaw, a criminal, was calling himself a Savior. Would we give him a chance? Yes, that is how people perceived Jesus. They saw Him as a young man, poor and deviant, from an unreliable home, with a stigma on his mother and consequently on himself. Such a man calling himself the Savior of the Jews! No wonder Jesus was called a stumbling block:

They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.” As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

Romans 9:32-33 NIV

A stone that causes men to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.

I Peter 2:8 NIV

We find a similar prophecy in Isaiah with almost identical words about the coming of the Lord of Hosts, namely the Redeemer of our age:

...a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken...

Isaiah 8:14-15 NIV

Perhaps this prophecy refers to both Jesus and Bahá’u’lláh, for they both lived in the Holy Land near Jerusalem, and they both faced rejection and persecution. But it is well to recognize that the prophecy concerns “the Lord of Hosts” (KJV, RSV, NEB, etc.) or “the Lord Almighty” (NIV), Titles used specifically in relation to Bahá’u’lláh and assumed by Him. (See Volume II.)

Jesus’ lowliness and humility deceived the undeserving crowds—those who worshipped power and pageantry—it stood as a stumbling block or obstacle between His heavenly glory and the people’s earthly vision. It screened the seekers, blocking the way of the worldly. No wonder Jesus said:

...happy the man who does not find me a stumbling-block.

Matthew 11:6 NEB

But the spiritually gifted and blessed who did not find Jesus a stumbling block were very few indeed. They consisted of a few devoted disciples who discerned in the stumbling block, a “living stone” (I Peter 2:4), and used it as a stepping stone to an eternal and abundant life.

And what kind of a man was Moses, He who had once saved the Jews? He was no more privileged than Jesus. For before becoming a Redeemer, He had committed murder, the worst of crimes. But such a fact did not matter to the Jews living in the time of Jesus.

They could not remember Moses' seeming lowliness; they could only think of His days of glory.

Why did God choose Moses and Jesus and not someone with seemingly more dependable "credentials"—a background beyond reproach, a family with flawless reputation? God made such choices, Bahá'u'lláh assures us, that we may be tested, that those who recognize the sun by its own distinction may rise above and be distinguished from those who worship and adore not the light, but its dawning-place, not the sun itself, but its name.

And now ponder in thy heart the commotion which God stirreth up. Reflect upon the strange and manifold trials with which He doth test His servants. Consider how He hath suddenly chosen from among His servants, and entrusted with the exalted mission of divine guidance Him Who was known as guilty of homicide, Who, Himself, had acknowledged His cruelty, and Who for well-nigh thirty years had, in the eyes of the world, been reared in the home of Pharaoh and been nourished at his table. Was not God, the omnipotent King, able to withhold the hand of Moses from murder, so that manslaughter should not be attributed unto Him, causing bewilderment and aversion among the people?³

Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh also refers to the tests and trials Mary had to face:

Likewise, reflect upon the state and condition of Mary. So deep was the perplexity of that most beauteous countenance, so grievous her case, that she bitterly regretted she had ever been born. To this beareth witness the text of the sacred verse wherein it is mentioned that after Mary had given birth to Jesus, she bemoaned her plight and cried out: "O would that I had died ere this, and been a thing forgotten, forgotten quite!" I swear by God! Such lamenting consumeth the heart and shaketh the being. Such consternation of soul, such despondency, could have been caused by no other than the censure of the enemy and the cavilings of the infidel and perverse. Reflect, what answer could Mary have given to the people around her? How could she claim that a Babe Whose father was unknown had been conceived of the Holy Ghost? Therefore did Mary, that veiled and immortal Countenance, take up her Child and return unto her home. No sooner

had the eyes of the people fallen upon her than they raised their voice saying: “O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of wickedness, nor unchaste thy mother.”

And now, meditate upon this most great convulsion, this grievous test. Notwithstanding all these things, God conferred upon that essence of the Spirit, Who was known amongst the people as fatherless, the glory of Prophethood, and made Him His testimony unto all that are in heaven and on earth.

Behold how contrary are the ways of the Manifestations of God, as ordained by the King of creation, to the ways and desires of men!⁴

To Summarize:

God tests our sincerity and our openness to His Teachers in many ways. Two ways were examined here:

- He pours certain precepts into the mold of metaphors or symbols and then challenges us to abandon our old ways of thinking in favor of the new; He asks us to admire and adore the contents, not the container—the light, not the lamp.

The symbols stand as veils between the seekers and the truth. If they are willing to lift them, they see and find the truth; if not, they stand veiled. The undeserving refuse to lift the veil, to rise above the obstacle. The obstacle saves them from the agony of doubt and indecision. They use it as an excuse to reject the inner meanings. They prefer the shell over the pearl, and as God has ordained they receive what they choose.

It is astounding how a few simple metaphors can faithfully carry out their divinely ordained mission—namely to distinguish the liberal-minded from the literal-minded.

- God sends His Messengers as lowly and humble men, so that only those who seek and adore the spiritual riches may find them and follow them; so that those who are veiled by tradition, dogmatism, or egotism, may stand in the dark, unable to see the Spirit of truth:

The world cannot receive him [the Spirit of truth] because the world neither sees nor knows him... John 14:17 NEB

Part III

How to Separate Symbolic Words from Literal

The inability of the people to distinguish between the symbolic and literal words and their unwillingness to accept the judgment of the new Redeemer have been perhaps the greatest obstacles in the path of the search for truth. A most fundamental key in the understanding of the Scriptures is to separate the literal from the figurative.

II

How to Separate the Symbolic from the Literal

Guide One: Man's Freedom of Choice Never Violated

Introduction

A final but significant question that arises from the preceding chapters is this: If one is not to judge a Messenger by His literal fulfillment of the signs and symbols, then how can one tell the literal from the symbolic, be certain that a given sign stands for an inner—not outer—truth? Are there certain rules or guidelines by which the two sets of sayings—especially as they relate to the unfolding of the future—can be identified or distinguished from each other?

Such a distinction can be made in at least five different ways. Though each way, or each guideline, can stand on its own, it is best to use it in conjunction with the others, for they all reinforce and complement each other. Therefore, if you find it difficult to accept any given guideline, postpone your judgment to the completion of all five guidelines.

The first of the five guidelines will be discussed in this chapter, the other four in the following two chapters.

Respect for Human Freedom

The first touchstone by which we can separate the symbolic from the literal is our knowledge of our Creator's respect for our freedom. Since God respects our freedom of choice, He would never impose the truth through the power of the miraculous. Therefore, whenever a sign or a prophecy implies deviation from the basic laws of nature, whenever it involves drama, glamour, or earthly glory directly or evidently associated with the Advent of a Messenger, then it should be regarded as symbolic, not literal.

The whole scheme of creation indicates that we must discern the truth through our inner—not outer—eyes, through insight, no eyesight. As the material world is governed by certain universal laws, so is the spiritual world. These laws stand unchanged, immutable. One of these laws is God's unchanging purpose for man.

God has established, through His Messengers, an enduring covenant with us, one which delineates His relationship with us. The covenant states that the Creator will provide us with both freedom of choice and knowledge of right and wrong—knowledge of that which leads to loftiness or abasement, to delight or despair. Then the joining of freedom and knowledge gives rise to responsibility. God grants us the first two; the last He leaves up to us.

Our Creator informs us that we are His most noble creation—"the essence of His light"—that He has granted us many gifts, among them the gift of knowledge, which He has crowned with still another gift, namely the knowledge of His own Wish for us. It is becoming that we harmonize our wish with His, for He is the source of all perfections, the end of all aspirations. Since our essence is patterned after His, that which will lead us towards Him is the harmonizing of our self with His. Because we are so noble, indeed the most exalted he has ever fashioned, He wishes for us the dignity of directing the course of our own destiny. We may wish to accept His Message and His Messengers or to reject them. We have the privilege of moving towards Him or moving away from Him.

This covenant stands unchanged, eternal. It manifests God's plan of creation; it reflects "the unchanging nature of His Purpose" (Heb. 6:17 NIV).

Anything that would alter our relationship with God would also violate the terms of this eternal agreement. It would certainly be against the terms of the covenant to crush our cherished freedom by miraculous means, by imposing upon us an array of dazzling or dramatic events—events which would so dumbfound us as to allow no choice but absolute servitude, reducing faith and freedom to utter fear.

In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

They have even failed to perceive that were the signs of the Manifestation of God in every age to appear in the visible realm in accordance with the text of established traditions, none could possibly deny or turn away, nor would the blessed be distinguished from the miserable, and the transgressor from the God-fearing. Judge fairly: Were the prophecies recorded in the Gospel to be literally fulfilled; were Jesus, Son of Mary, accompanied by angels, to descend from the visible heaven upon the clouds; who would dare to disbelieve, who would dare to reject the truth, and wax disdainful? Nay, such consternation would immediately seize all the dwellers of the earth that no soul would feel able to utter a word, much less to reject or accept the truth.¹

And in the words of the Báb:

...it is incumbent upon a lowly servant to acquiesce to whatever proof God hath appointed, and not to follow his own idle fancy. If the wishes of the people were to be gratified not a single disbeliever would remain on earth. For once the Apostle of God had fulfilled the wishes of the people they would unhesitatingly have embraced His Faith. May God save thee, shouldst thou seek any evidence according to thy selfish desire; rather it behooveth thee to uphold the unfailing proof which God hath appointed. The object of thy belief in God is but to secure His good-pleasure. How then dost thou seek as a proof of thy faith a thing which hath been and is contrary to His good-pleasure?²

The Consequences of Forced Faith

Even if only a few of the many heavenly events prophesied in the Scriptures did actually happen, in ways that people could see a direct link between them and the advent of the Redeemer, human existence as we know it would be utterly disturbed, man's relationship to himself and his Creator would be completely altered. Responsibility would lose its meaning, good and evil, reward and punishment, their relevance. There would be no seeking, striving, or discovering. Faith could no longer survive, for faith thrives on freedom and on trust in the unknown and the unknowable, and when there is no faith and no trust there is no hope, and when there is no hope there is no purpose and no joy in living.

Furthermore, faced with the dramatic display of divine power, no soul could have a chance to be tested. There could exist no doubts, no deviations from the truth; it would be as if God were recreating Himself. But this has not been the divine purpose in creating man.

The Example of Jesus

The divine Manifestations have always refused to impose their beliefs through the power of the miraculous. When believers rely on miracles as evidence of validity, they deviate in their beliefs from what God has established as the standard of truth. Contrary to common beliefs, Christ never wished to be adored or exalted by His miracles. He did not want His followers to emphasize them, or even talk about them. And He repeatedly asked those who observed the emanations of His divine power to keep quiet about what they had seen, but to no avail:

The Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone."

Matthew 8:4 NIV

Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.

Luke 8:56 NIV

...Jesus warned them sternly, “See that no one knows about this.”
But they went out and spread the news about him all over that
region.

Matthew 9:30-31 NIV

See also Luke 5:14; Mark 1:44; 5:43; 7:36

The Jews in the time of Jesus expected dramatic displays of miraculous power; the Greeks expected dramatic display of academic knowledge. Paul responded to these unreasonable expectations in these words:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

I Corinthians 1:22-25 NIV

As the words of Paul imply, and as we note from the facts of history, Jesus never wished to astound the people, even by His knowledge. It was certainly within His power to reveal many more truths than He did, for He mirrored forth the All-Knowing. He could have readily disclosed mysteries far beyond the comprehension of Greek philosophers. He could have astounded those who prided themselves in academic knowledge—mathematics, medicine, astronomy, physics, philosophy. He could have disclosed the exact distance or position of stars, the size of the sun, the motion of the earth, a fact undiscovered then. He could have uncovered the secrets of wealth. He could have saved the countless sufferers from the pain of disease and hunger—especially the little children whom He loved dearly.

But we don't see any sign of such an outpouring or unveiling of knowledge. We find Christ instead talking in simple terms about good and evil, love and forgiveness, heaven and hell, hypocrisy and deception. We find Him talking about heavenly blessings, leaving the earthly to the care of those from the earth:

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth.

John 3:31 NIV

We find Christ even hiding His divine power in His lowly human temple.

How humiliating it must be for the divine Messengers to encounter people who refuse to believe unless they see miracles. All the Messengers suffer from such shortsightedness. Jesus endured a great deal:

Will none of you ever believe without seeing signs and portents?
John 4:48 NEB

How does a rich man feel when he finds that people respect him not because of his worthiness, but his wealth, not because of his faithfulness, but his fame or fortune? No wonder when the Pharisees and teachers of the law pressed for miracles, Jesus spoke with high emotions:

At this some of the doctors of the law and the Pharisees said, ‘Master, we should like you to show us a sign.’ He answered: ‘It is a wicked, godless generation that asks for a sign...’*
Matthew 12:38-39 NEB
See also Luke 11:29

The Purpose of Heavenly Signs that Precede the Advent of Great Messengers

The heavenly signs that precede the advent of the divine Messengers simply signal the approach of the new age and prepare and summon the seeker of truth. They do not constitute compelling proofs, for they appear also (though with less frequency and intensity) at times other than the dawn of the Manifestations, in such a way as to be deemed as compelling proof of their divine distinction.

An example of such events heralding the advent of Christ was the emergence of the stars guiding the wise men from the East. Similar events preceded the dawn of other Messengers as well (see *The Book of Certitude*, pp. 62-66), but none were as dramatic as those heralding the advent of the new Revelation. Here are three major

* Not all the questions about miracles can be answered here. You will find a whole chapter on miracles in the first volume.

events preceding, or following, the advent of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, events observed by millions:

1. The dark day of 1780.
2. The falling of stars in 1833, eleven years prior to the advent of the Báb, an event so dramatic as to be unparalleled in all recorded history.
3. The falling of stars again in 1866, about three years after the declaration of Bahá'u'lláh.*

As in the advent of Christ, these heavenly signs did not directly accompany the advent of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and therefore they cannot count as proofs of validity. They should be viewed simply as signs of awakening.

To Summarize:

God's wisdom ordains that the seekers of truth discern the divine and be convinced through their inner—not outer—eye. The inner eye can accept or reject the truth on its own; the outer eye cannot but bow in utter servitude to the overwhelming display of power.

* For details see the first volume: *I Shall Come Again*.

12

How to Separate the Symbolic from the Literal

Guide Two: Symbolism Often Applied to Impossible or Improbable Events

The Symbolism of Death

Let us consider a second standard by which to separate the symbolic from the non-symbolic. The language of the Scriptures reveals that symbolism is often applied in relation to seemingly improbable or impossible tasks or events. To the request of a disciple who wished to attend the funeral of his father and help bury him, Jesus replied: “follow me and let the dead bury their dead” (Matt. 8:21-22). What Jesus meant was to elevate the vision of the disciples, reminding them that what mattered most was the life of the spirit. Follow me, He seemed to say to “the simple fisher folk from Galilee,” that you may become “the fishers of men,” bestowing upon the seekers of divine Wisdom the eternal life, “the bread that descends from heaven” and satisfies the hunger of the spirit, for we are in essence spiritual beings and:

...our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen: for what is seen passes away; what is unseen is eternal.

II Corinthians 4:18 NEB

Jesus could have simply said: “Let the unbelievers bury their kind.” But He wished, by speaking in symbols, to indicate and establish the distinction of divine Words. Further, the use of the word “dead” in place of “unbeliever” is not only more vivid but emphatic as well.

Here is a piece from The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh encouraging us to escape “death” by freeing ourselves from “the veils of idle fancy:”

O SON OF MAN!

The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore, free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life and worthy to meet Me. Thus may death not come upon thee, neither weariness nor trouble.¹

The Death of “Ego”

Some words have several symbolic meanings; the word “death” is one such word. One of its meanings as used in the Scriptures is the death of “ego,” namely egotism. If the death of “spirit” is the ultimate in self-debasement and degradation, the death of “ego” is the ultimate in self-enhancement and growth. The first leads to the death of what is noble, the second to the death of what is ignoble. To become a true believer, one must empty himself of all self-conceit; he must put his egotism so that the spiritual forces can come to life. Here is a reference from the Scriptures conveying such a meaning:

...anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Romans 6:7 NIV

If taken literally the verse conveys no rational meaning, for if death freed one from sin, what would happen to reward and punishment promised in all the scriptures? Let us review another verse indicating such a meaning:

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Revelation 14:13 NIV

It is obvious that this verse is not addressed to the dead who have passed on to the next Kingdom, but to the living who have crushed their egotistical self to death, in order to die in the Lord, to become one with the divine. When an unbeliever submits himself to the Will of the Lord, he draws the divine bounties; when he empties his soul of pride and self-glory, a new life permeates his whole being.

Death in God is the highest honor for a human being. For what can be more noble than giving up the old self to become one with the divine. This is what Christ meant when He said:

...The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.

John 12:23-24 NEB

The Bahá'í Scriptures, too, use the word death in the same sense used in the biblical Scriptures. Here is a passage from the Báb pointing to the death of ego:

True death is realized when a person dieth to himself at the time of His Revelation in such wise that he seeketh naught except Him.²

In a book named *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh enumerates the stages of man's spiritual evolution, namely his journey from self to the divine. The journey involves seven stages of "valleys," the last or highest stage being "the valley of true poverty and absolute nothingness." Here is a brief passage from *The Seven Valleys*, referring to this stage, which constitutes the crown of human evolution:

This station is the dying from self and the living in God, the being poor in self and rich in the Desired One. Poverty as here referred to signifieth being poor in the things of the created world, rich in the things of God's world.³

One way to understand the meaning of death is to study the meaning of life. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

...true life is not the life of the flesh but the life of the spirit. For the life of the flesh is common to both men and animals, whereas the life of the spirit is possessed only by the pure in heart who have quaffed from the ocean of faith and partaken of the fruit of

certitude. This life knoweth no death, and this existence is crowned by immortality. Even as it hath been said: "He who is a true believer liveth both in this world and in the world to come." If by "life" be meant this earthly life, it is evident that death must needs overtake it.⁴

The Symbolism of Rebirth

Let us consider another familiar example indicating the application of symbolism to a literally impossible event. Jesus sometimes spoke of rebirth to signify the germination or regeneration of a new spiritual life. But the literal and closed-minded listeners of His time could not readily conceive the implied meaning. They objected, and wondered how it would be possible for a person to return to the womb (John 3:3-8).

Their limited conception of reality had solidified their rational powers; they could reach out so much, and no more. But now, many centuries later, we look back and marvel at their blindness, wondering why they could not see the simple and striking truth declared by Jesus. In fact we are now so accustomed to the symbolic sense of "a second birth" that we never even conceive, in our minds, its literal implications or improbability.

Rebirth means birth into a new spiritual life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

The Prophets of God have been sent, the Holy Books have been written, so that man may be made free. Just as he is born into this world of imperfection from the womb of his earthly mother, so is he born into the world of spirit through divine education. When a man is born into the world of phenomena he finds the universe; when he is born from this world to the world of the spirit, he finds the Kingdom.⁵

The first birth is physical, the second spiritual. To enter the Kingdom of God it is essential that we achieve a second birth. As without the first birth we cannot enter the earthly kingdom, so without the second, we cannot enter the heavenly. Entering the earthly realm

requires detachment, the leaving of the womb; entering the heavenly realm also requires detachment from the world, from the forces of ego. Both births require effort and pain.

The Symbolism of Water

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

Water is the cause of life, and when Christ speaks of water, He is symbolizing that which is the cause of Everlasting Life.⁶

In *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá’u’lláh quotes this verse:

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ John 3:5-6

Bahá’u’lláh then provides this explanation:

The purport of these words is that whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the Manifestation of Holiness, he verily is of those that have attained unto “life” and “resurrection” and have entered into the “paradise” of the love of God. And whosoever is not of them, is condemned to “death” and “deprivation,” to the “fire” of unbelief, and to the “wrath” of God. In all the scriptures, the books and chronicles, the sentence of death, of fire, of blindness, of want of understanding and hearing, hath been pronounced against those whose lips have tasted not the ethereal cup of true knowledge, and whose hearts have been deprived of the grace of the holy Spirit in their day. Even as it hath been previously recorded: “Hearts have they with which they understand not.”⁸

Obviously “water” in the preceding passage is not literal water, but the water of life, the divine bounties or forces that sustain the spirit.

In the Scriptures, we find various expressions conveying such a meaning, expressions such as living water (Zech. 14:8-9), river of life (Rev. 22:1-3), and water of life (John 4:11-15; Rev. 22:17), all referring to the life-giving powers of spirit.

The Symbolism of “Slaying” and the “Sword”

Among the chief events expected to accompany the advent of the Redeemer of our time and to unfold on the Day of Judgment or Resurrection is the slaying of the people by their Lord:

At that time those slain by the Lord will be everywhere—from one end of the earth to the other. They will not be mourned or gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground.

Jeremiah 25:33 NIV

If portrayed literally, the drama of the Day of Judgment turns into an act of cruelty, death, horror, pain, and agony, on a scale never seen before. Is it conceivable for the Creator of universe, the source and the essence of love and compassion to engage in the slaughter of hundreds of millions of His defenseless children?

Many of the Muslims believe that the Redeemer does the slaying with a sword in His hand, and He continues to slay until blood reaches the stirrup of His horse. In other words, the Savior of the world must chase the masses of sinners, who obviously outnumber the saints many times over, until He produces rivers and waves of blood. How many children must He make orphan? How many millions must He massacre, to fulfill the prophecies?

This is why religion loses its grip and glamour, this is how fanaticism subdues faith, this is how dogmatism overcomes reason.

The symbolism of “making war with the sword” is also found in the biblical Scriptures. The following prophecy from the Book of Revelation is addressed to all humanity, and specifically to the “churches” or religions of our age:

These are the words of the One who has the sharp two-edged sword: I know where you live; it is the place where Satan has his throne. And yet you are holding fast to my cause...So repent! If you do not, I shall come to you soon and make war upon them with the sword that comes out of my mouth. Hear, you who have ears to hear, what the Spirit says to the churches! To

him who is victorious I will give some of the hidden manna; I will give him also a white stone, and on the stone will be written a new name, known to none but him that receives it.

Revelation 2:12-17 NEB

The preceding verses contain not only a prophetic sign but the meaning of the sign as well.

It is evident that by “the sword that comes out of my mouth” is meant a living sword. It is an instrument, which establishes the truth. It is a tongue, which proclaims the Word of God—a Word that like a sword separates truth from falsehood, the sincere from the insincere, the open-minded from the closed-minded. It cuts and makes its influence in two ways: It cuts out from the bond of ignorance those who thirst for truth, and it separates from the cord of faith those who pretend belief, falsely regarding themselves as the elect. This is how the first are made the last, this is how the “stars” fall. God has always declared war on the forces of darkness, but the war is spiritual; it is always waged by the tongue—the twin forces of wisdom and utterance—as well as pure deeds:

We have decreed that war shall be waged in the path of God with the armies of wisdom and utterance, and of a goodly character and praiseworthy deeds.⁹ Bahá'u'lláh

The expectation of a Savior with a mighty sword was prevalent also during the first advent of Jesus. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His *Paris Talks* enumerated the literal expectations of the Jews and then explained the symbolism involved. Here is what the Jews fancied:

He shall come with a sword of steel, and with a sceptre of iron shall He rule!¹⁰

And here is the symbolism:

The sword He [Christ] carried was the sword of His tongue, with which He divided the good from the evil, the true from the false, the faithful from the unfaithful, and the light from the darkness. His Word was indeed a sharp sword!¹¹

A word similar to sword is “scepter,” which is also used symbolically:

...the scepter of justice is the scepter of his kingdom.

Hebrews 1:8 NEB

The Symbolism of “Balance” and “Trumpet-Call”

“Balance” is another word used symbolically in relation to the events unfolding during the Judgment Day. Balance serves the same purpose as does the sword. Before the advent of the Redeemer, all humanity stands on a single plane. Then by the attitude that they express toward Him (acceptance, partial acceptance, indifference, denial, condemnation), they move to different positions or grades. God does not need a balance to weigh the good and the bad. He has created more efficient ways of accomplishing His purpose. The efficient Way is to use His Word; it stands as the unerring balance. Here are once again the words of the Báb:

All men have proceeded from God and unto Him shall all return. All shall appear before Him for judgment. He is the Lord of the Day of Resurrection, of Regeneration and of Reckoning, and His revealed Word is the Balance.¹²

And here are the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

Say: This is the infallible Balance which the Hand of God is holding, in which all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth are weighed, and their fate determined, if ye be of them that believe and recognize this truth.¹³

Perhaps it should be mentioned that as we are weighed by the divine balance here we will be weighed again by the same Balance in the next realm—the heavenly Kingdom. For death is a door to a new life and a new awareness. The earth is the place of testing, where we live as we please. At death, we must face the ultimate balance. Here are the words of Bahá’u’lláh addressed to a king:

Set before thine eyes God’s unerring Balance and, as one standing in His Presence, weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life. Bring thyself to account ere thou art summoned to a reckoning, on the Day when no man shall

have strength to stand for fear of God, the Day when the hearts of the heedless ones shall be made to tremble.¹⁴

Because the glamour of this world dims the glory of the next, Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly attempts to sharpen our vision:

Ye, and all ye possess, shall pass away. Ye shall, most certainly, return to God, and shall be called to account for your doings in the presence of Him Who shall gather together the entire creation.¹⁵

Ye will most certainly be called upon to answer for His trust on the day when the Balance of Justice shall be set, the day when unto every one shall be rendered his due, when the doings of all men, be they rich or poor, shall be weighed.¹⁶

Thou shalt, after thy departure, discover what We have revealed unto thee, and shalt find all thy doings recorded in the Book wherein the works of all them that dwell on earth, be they greater or less than the weight of an atom, are noted down.¹⁷

Still another word used in relation to the events of resurrection is “trumpet-call” (I Thess. 4:16). God does not need a trumpet to proclaim His Message. He has many other instruments at work; communication media of the new age can spread the word instantly and efficiently. By trumpet is meant the call of the Redeemer; it is “the thunder of His Voice” (Job 37:4); the Vibrations of His Pen.

Verily We have sounded the Trumpet which is none other than My Pen of Glory, and lo, mankind hath swooned away before it, save them whom God pleaseth to deliver as a token of His grace. He is the Lord of bounty, the Ancient of Days.¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh

See also Revelation 4:1, and *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 116

It may be more than coincidence that the day (May 24, 1844) the first telegraphic message was sent marked the dawning of a new era. It was dispatched the day after the Báb had declared His Mission. And the message communicated on that day was prophetic indeed; it read: “What hath God wrought!” (Num. 23:23).

Other Symbols: the Cutting of Hands, the Fire, the Poor, the Blind, the Prisoners

Let us explore further references applying symbolism to literally improbable, if not impossible, events. Again, in the following case, as in the case of “second birth,” we are so used to the symbolic meanings of the passage that we may not even consider its literal application:

If your hand is your undoing, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life maimed than to keep both hands and go to hell and the unquenchable fire.

Mark 9:43-44 NEB

See also 9:45-47

After the preceding warning, Jesus goes on to use still another symbol:

For every one shall be salted with fire...

Mark 9:49

(More about “fire” later.) This is still another example:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to ***the poor***, to proclaim release for ***prisoners*** and recovery of sight for ***the blind*** [emphasis added].

Luke 4:18-19 NEB

What did Christ mean by “the poor,” “the blind,” “the prisoners”? Did He mean prisoners of self, the blind in spirit, the poor in wisdom? Or did He mean to convey literal meanings? The answer should be quite evident. Bahá’u’lláh declares:

He is truly wise whom the world and all that is therein have not deterred from recognizing the light of this Day, who will not allow men’s idle talk to cause him to swerve from the way of righteousness. He is indeed as one dead who, at the wondrous dawn of this Revelation, hath failed to be quickened by its soul-stirring breeze. He is indeed a captive who hath not recognized the Supreme Redeemer, but hath suffered his soul to be bound, distressed and helpless, in the fetters of his desires.¹⁹

To Summarize:

To speak of spiritual realities that in the earthly domain seem impossible or improbable is not uncommon in the Scriptures. To take all the prophecies literally is to overlook such a distinct mark of the words of the divine Messengers.

13

How to Separate the Symbolic from the Literal

Guides Three, Four, and Five

Third Guide: the Examples of History

Let us now consider the third guide to the distinction of the figurative from the literal. We can distinguish the two sets of sayings by studying the examples of history, by learning what happened in similar instances in the past.

To help us attain objectively, to free us from misconceptions, Bahá'u'lláh asks us again and again to look back and try to study the examples of those who have been in our place before, to see how the events lived up to the expectations, how the divine Messengers responded to their calls:

Consider the past. How many, both high and low, have, at all times, yearningly awaited the advent of the Manifestations of God in the sanctified persons of His chosen Ones. How often have they expected His coming, how frequently have they prayed that the breeze of divine mercy might blow, and the promised Beauty step forth from behind the veil of concealment, and be made manifest to all the world. And whensoever the portals of

grace did open...they all denied Him, and turned away from His face—the face of God Himself. Refer ye, to verify this truth, to that which hath been recorded in every sacred Book.

Ponder for a moment, and reflect upon that which hath been the cause of such denial on the part of those who have searched with such earnestness and longing.¹

Similarly Jesus referred to historical examples to awaken and to guide the seekers of His Kingdom (Matt. 12:3-4).

That the people of the first century had cherished expectations similar to those cherished by the people of the 19th century (and those of today as well) is quite evident; that they were led to their beliefs by misunderstanding the Scriptures is also quite evident; that they were disappointed to find their expectations wrong is also equally evident. What is not so evident, at least to most of us, is that we may be following their example and repeating their mistakes and misjudgments after twenty centuries of learning and enlightenment. Examples justifying such comparison are many.

The refusal of Jesus to live up to the pompous expectations of the literal-minded Pharisees indicates that the prophecies implying earthly power and splendor carry only symbolic messages or meanings, not literal.

Many examples have already been cited. For illustration, let us repeat one of those. The Jews had believed that their Savior would come to save them from servitude to the Romans, would restore their lost fortunes, and would set Himself on the throne of David (II Sam. 7:16) with power and great glory. And they said:

But we had been hoping that he was the man to liberate Israel...
Luke 24:21 NEB

Yet in response to their expectations, based on misjudging the spirit of the Scriptures, they received a poor man, the son of a carpenter, destitute of all worldly honors. In fact, after the advent of Christ, their fortunes declined even further. Such a decline was clearly predicted by Christ (Matt. 23:37-39). The Jews expected their Messiah to endure forever:

Our Law teaches us that the Messiah continues for ever...

John 12:34 NEB

Yet they received One who endured for only three short years. They had hoped for earthly sovereignty; Christ delivered spiritual sovereignty, saying: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Yes, the Jews hoped for something dramatic, concrete, the descent of something sensible from heaven. Heavenly thoughts, glowing words, worthy and good wishes would not save them from servitude, would not satisfy their insatiable cravings for power and glory. And they were disappointed to hear:

The spirit alone gives life, the flesh is of no avail... John 6:63 NEB

But it was difficult to adore the spirit, to seek the spiritual. How could they honor a man they already knew too well a lowly neighbor, a poor wanderer from their hometown? After all, what good can come out of a little town like Nazareth?

Never has a Messenger come in accordance with the expectation of the masses. Never has a Redeemer come with earthly honor and glory. Never has a Savior sought to convince the crowds by the forces of the miraculous—the dazzling display of power and pageantry.

Fourth Guide: Judging Each Sign in the Context of the Whole Scriptures

And now the fourth guide with which to separate the symbolic from the literal: the sacred Words can best be interpreted and understood in the light of the full spectrum of divine purpose and divine teachings. No verse should ever be viewed independently, by itself, without complete consideration given to the whole Scriptures. If this one guide alone were heeded, many of the misconceptions and misjudgments prevalent in the past or present would never have arisen.

Let us consider an example. We are taught, on the one hand, that the expected Redeemer shall come quietly as a thief (II Peter 3:10; Rev. 16:15), and on the other, that He shall come “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30), viewed by every eye (Rev. 1:7). We are further told that the Redeemer shall again face rejection even “as it was in the days of Noah” (Luke 17:25-26), that the people will remain negligent to the very end, until disaster has struck (Matt. 24:37-41), that the world cannot receive the promised Savior, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him (John 14:17).

How is it possible, we might ask, for the Redeemer to come quietly as a thief in the night and at the same time ride through heavenly spheres with great glory and majesty, observed by every eye? If this great Personage appeared with such dazzling splendor, would He not so dumbfound the whole of humankind as to leave no chance of denial for any one? Then how could He be rejected? A literal descent from heaven would make by far the greatest news in the whole history of the human race. Then how could the people remain asleep? How could He live among the wondering masses without making His presence known to them?

Still further: we are warned in the Scriptures not to be deceived by false saviors or prophets. If Christ were to come from heavenly spheres surrounded by the angels, then how could anyone misjudge Him, be deceived by falsehood? Such majestic descent would leave no room for mistake and no probability of misjudgment for anyone. For no one could ever match, even remotely, His miraculous and dazzling descent.

Still further: we are asked throughout the Scriptures to keep a watchful eye, to be ready for the advent (Luke 12:37-38; Matt. 24:42-43; Mark 13:34-35), to thirst for truth and to show courage in seeking the Savior, and that the punishment of the cowards is hell (Matt. 24:51; Rev. 21:8). Now if Jesus were to literally descend from heaven, the seekers of His Kingdom would not have needed to be reminded so often to stay awake and watch. A literal descent from heaven would constitute such a spectacular and dramatic spectacle as to draw the attention of even the most skeptic, the most negligent and worldly among the people. There is no way He could thus

descend, without being noticed or recognized by all humanity—believers and unbelievers alike. If recognition were easy, then why would those who refuse to search and to show courage be threatened with tortures of hell?

And finally we are warned that at the time of the advent we will be all testing opportunities. For out of fear everyone would be forced to accept the truth.

Does it not, therefore, seem more reasonable to conclude that the readiness and the watchfulness are not visual but spiritual? For it is the latter that demands constant polishing, ceaseless, dedicated, and supreme endeavors.

Does not the admonition of keeping a watch and being prepared for the advent of the Redeemer stand in harmony with the prophecy of His coming quietly like a thief in the night?

And do not the preceding two prophecies stand in harmony with the prophecy that few will respond to His call or enter the gate of His guidance, that His Faith will grow gradually like a seed, and that He will once again face rejection?

And do not the preceding prophecies stand in harmony with the gloomy pictures drawn from our world and its people? For we are told:

...That day cannot come before the final rebellion against God, when wickedness will be revealed in human form, the man doomed to perdition.

II Thessalonians 2:3 NEB
See also II Timothy 3:1-5 cited earlier

And do not the prophecies that refer to His Day as “A Day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness” (Joel 2:2; see also Amos 5:18; Zeph. 1:14-18) further reinforce the idea of secrecy conveyed by “night” which protects and conceals “the thief” from all those in sleep and unawareness, from all those whose eyes are closed, whose mind is complacent, and whose spirit unconscious?

And do not these explain why the Redeemer is said to come over the clouds, and that the people have to face severe tests? (The

biblical references unveiling the meaning of “cloud” and “glory” will follow soon.)

The Book of Revelation addresses the seven churches (major religions) of our age reminding them of their weaknesses, their strengths, and their responsibilities. The admonitions given to these institutions are emphatic, direct, and forceful. The strength of the words used indicates the depth of the sleep and unawareness:

...I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Revelation 3:1-3 NIV

The divine words indicate again and again that recognition of truth requires awareness, keen hunger, and longing desire. This has always been true and will always be. What determines the seeker’s success is sincerity of motives and detachment from worldly cares, and not reliance on a heavenly hand to spellbind the curious, to impose faith, and replace force for freedom through the power of mighty miracles or dazzling dramas.

Fifth Guide: the Testimony of the New Redeemer

Here is one more guide—one that can never fail. We can consider a sign symbolic or non-symbolic simply on the authority or testimony of the new Messenger. But how do we know He is right? By studying His credentials; by putting His proofs to the most exacting tests of reason. To take the opposite course, namely to start with interpretation—deciding in advance which signs are symbolic, which signs literal—and pass one’s judgment on the basis of suppositions, before having examined the credentials (which constitute the ultimate proofs) is to deviate not only from the dictates of reason but the spirit and the letter of the Scriptures as well. Such a choice undoubtedly leads to the most perilous among all the pitfalls in the

path of the search for truth, yet it is the most common. As stated we must use what God has established as the standard of truth, and not what we establish ourselves. We must obey the divine Commandment, and act as we are told: leave the interpretation of the mysteries (symbols) to the Redeemer:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts... I Corinthians 4:5 NIV

Let us go back a while to the time of the first Advent. Christ heals on the Sabbath. The Jews object, accusing Him of breaking one of the most exacting laws of Moses. They confront Him saying: "Why do you break the Sabbath? Why do you ignore or change that which is declared to be perfect? For 'The law of the Lord is perfect' (Psa. 19:7)." Jesus responds on His authority as the Savior, saying: "The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6:5). What Jesus is communicating is this: Don't object to the divine Interpreter, for He is the authority on the law. (See also how Christ responded to those who objected to His changing the law of divorce and relaxing the prohibition on forbidden foods (Mark 10:4-6; 7:15.)

Now suppose the words of Christ were addressed to you. How would you respond? Would you keep on saying: "I know you are wrong, for the Law of the Lord is perfect; you cannot improve or change that which is already declared to be perfect"? Or would you say to yourself: "Before rejecting Him because of His radical interpretation of the law, I had better find out if He is indeed the Lord of the law; let me first examine His proofs and then pass judgment"?

Yes, once a savior establishes Himself beyond doubt to be the Savior, then no one has the right to object to His interpretation, even though His interpretation may radically differ from traditional or established ways or views. For He is the law and the Lord of the law. He is the truth and the Spirit of truth, and He cannot come short of the Glory of God, for He is the Glory of God. In the words of the Báb:

Were all the peoples of the world to testify unto a thing and were He to testify unto another, His testimony will be regarded as God's testimony, while aught else but Him hath been and will

ever be as naught; for it is through His might that a thing assumeth existence.²

And again:

Moreover, take ye good heed not to be reckoned among those of the past who were invested with knowledge, yet by reason of their learning waxed proud before God, the Transcendent, the Self-Subsisting, inasmuch as on that Day it is He Who is the All-Knowing, the Omniscient, the Source of all knowledge, far above such as are endued with learning; and it is He Who is the Potent, the All-Compelling, the Lord of power, in the face of those who wield power; and it is He Who is the Mighty, the Most August, the Most Glorious before such as display glory; and on that Day it is He Who is the Lofty, the All-Highest, the Source of exaltation, far above those who are elevated in rank; and it is He Who is the Almighty, the Source of glory and grandeur, far above the pomp of the mighty; and it is He Who is the Omnipotent, the Supreme Ruler, the Lord of judgment, transcending all such as are invested with authority; and it is He Who is the Generous, the Most Benevolent, the Essence of bounty, Who standeth supreme in the face of such as show benevolence; and it is He Who is the Ordainer and the Supreme Wielder of authority and power, inconceivably high above those who hold earthly dominion; and it is He Who is the Most Excellent, the Unsurpassed, the Pre-eminent in the face of every man of accomplishment.³

It happens so often that someone hears about Bahá'u'lláh's claim and then raises a question such as: "How could Bahá'u'lláh's claim be true, when we know that at the time of the Second Advent the world must come to an end? It is obvious that the end has not yet come. We will all know if it ever does." Thus a simple objection such as this terminates the search into a claim that covers more than a hundred volumes of knowledge and wisdom. This is how preconceived notions obscure the truth. This is how a Mary Magdalene (a peasant) and a Peter (a fisherman) find the truth, but Annas (the greatest Jewish scholar) and a Caiaphas (the greatest judge) fail flagrantly. This is the cloud every Redeemer must ride on. This is what led to the execution of John and Jesus, to the denial of Abraham, Noah, Moses, indeed, every Messenger of God.

And yet in spite of such a perfect record of failure, we continue walking in such a perilous path.

This is the most common mistake and the most blinding obstacle in the path of the seekers of truth. Yet the solution is so simple: all they need to do is to reverse the sequence, start with proof and end with interpretation; instead of starting with interpretation and then, because of outright rejection, never even getting to proofs.

In the following passage Bahá'u'lláh asks us not to allow little problems or questions to prevent us from attaining the ocean of divine Knowledge. Here we see Bahá'u'lláh speaking with the same authority as Christ did. We see the same powers manifested in His words.

O thou who hast fixed thy gaze upon My countenance! Say: O ye heedless ones! By reason of a droplet ye have deprived yourselves of the ocean of heavenly verses and for the sake of an insignificant atom ye have shut yourselves out from the splendors of the Day-Star of Truth. Who else but Bahá hath the power to speak forth before the face of mankind? Judge ye fairly and be not of the unjust. Through Him the oceans have surged, the mysteries have been divulged and the trees have lifted up their voices exclaiming: The kingdoms of earth and heaven are God's, the Revealer of signs, the Fountainhead of clear tokens.⁴

Part IV

A New Interpretation Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

I Corinthians 4:5

14

No One but the Redeemer Qualified to Interpret Symbolic Words

No One Qualified to Interpret the Mysteries

For my thoughts are not yours thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

In His *Book of Certitude* Bahá'u'lláh points again and again to the inability of the people to interpret the divine Utterance:

It is obvious and manifest that the true meaning of the utterances of the Birds of Eternity is revealed to none except those that manifest the Eternal Being, and the melodies of the Nightingale of Holiness can reach no ear save that of the denizens of the everlasting realm.¹

The words of Bahá'u'lláh are confirmed by those of the Scriptures. For they, too, ask the believers not to expect the promised Redeemer to conform to a set of standards fashioned by their fallible judgment.

It is evident that all are unknowing save Him who is invested with divine Knowledge, and that “all have sinned and come short of the Glory of God” (Romans 3:23)—a glory and excellence bestowed on no one save the supreme Savior of the age.

If people were given the full knowledge of the Scriptures, they would not be admonished and warned to postpone their judgment and to wait for the Lord or the Redeemer Himself to come and unseal the mysteries. As we seek to interpret the Scriptures, the following injunction should at all times be our chief guide in the path of the search for truth:

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord* come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God. I Corinthians 4:5

The new translation of this verse reads:

So pass no premature judgment: wait until the Lord comes. For he will bring to light what darkness hides, and disclose men's inward motives; then will be the time for each to receive from God such praise as he deserves. I Corinthians 4:5 NEB

As the divine Words signify, we are asked not to make premature judgment, but rather leave the mysteries, or "the hidden things" (the symbols), to the discretion of the supreme Savior and Redeemer of the world, the Lord of the new age.

Here is one more reference from the Gospel disqualifying the believers from interpreting the prophecies on their own, without the aid of the divine Interpreter, for everyone sins and everyone errs, save the Glory of God:

But first note this: no one can interpret any prophecy of Scripture by himself. For it was not through any human whim that men prophesied of old; men they were, but, impelled by the Holy Spirit, they spoke the words of God. II Peter 1:20-21 NEB

Muhammad's words stand in perfect harmony with both biblical and Bahá'í Scriptures:

...None knoweth its interpretation but God. Qur'án 3:5

Therefore, instead of assuming the attitude of an all-knowing authority, let us acknowledge with utter humility our ignorance,

* The Promised One of our age is often referred to as the Lord; see Volume II.

refusing to insist on our own interpretations and expectations, at least until we have examined the credentials of Him who claims to be the divine Interpreter.

As the preceding verse indicates (“he will...disclose men’s inward motives”), the new Messenger is promised to uncover or disclose not only the inner mysteries of the Scriptures but the inner motives of the people as well. For His day is the day of testing, the day of reckoning. Everyone must receive a chance to prove his purity, sincerity, and receptivity, to prove whether he believes only in the verses that support his own preconceived notions of truth, or in all verses, including the preceding one, which gives the authority to interpret to the Savior Himself.

Failing to See What Does Not Fit

It is strange that during the dawn of all divine Revelations people have used identical means or methods of rejecting the truth. A most common method has been to repeat and remember only the verses that fit into the pattern of their preconceived notions and to disregard and forget the ones that don’t. This is how the masses of Muslims reacted to Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. For the Islámic Scriptures too (exactly as the Judeo-Christian) disqualify the believers from interpreting divine verses, claiming knowledge of the mysteries. Because of their double standards, Bahá’u’lláh addressed them in these words:

How strange! These people [the deniers] with one hand cling to those verses of the Qur’án and those traditions of the people of certitude which they have found to accord with their inclinations and interests, and with the other reject those which are contrary to their selfish desires.²

Apparently during the dawn of Muhammad, too, the same problem persisted, for the people were told:

Then is it only a part of the Book that ye believe in, and do ye reject the rest?
Qur’án 2:85 A

Disagreement among the Interpreters is an Evidence of Incomprehension

The message contained in the preceding biblical verses, namely man's inability to interpret the divine Words, is so fundamental and so far-reaching that if people disregarded all the signs or prophecies but honored this injunction alone, their search would finally lead them to the path of truth. But unfortunately the masses of the people as well as their leaders have always disregarded this fundamental injunction, assuming to know all the mysteries. They have held such a belief, even though they have failed to come to a consensus on myriads of other issues—from the most fundamental to the most trivial. Their disagreements have covered the whole spectrum of religious beliefs. The denominations have disagreed on such issues as the day of Communion, the acceptable diet, the status and role of women in the family (and men as well), abortion, celibacy, women and black becoming priest. Even the name of the Creator is in doubt and in dispute. Is His true name God or Jehovah?

As stated, The World Council of Churches could not come to a consensus on the return of Christ, namely whether He will ever return.

It is evident that if the believers or their leaders knew the right interpretation of the Scriptures, divisions would not begin within the church. For divine Words are consistent, and God never wishes to have a house divided against itself. Denominations begin and flourish, because the interpreters misjudge the meanings.

Yet in spite of disagreement on myriads of issues, many still claim that their interpretation of prophecies is absolutely reliable. They fail to come to an agreement on concrete issues, yet they claim to know the symbolic. They fail to realize that even Jesus' disciples—who stood so close to the source of Knowledge and whose interpretation of their Savior's teachings became a permanent part of the Gospel—sometimes could not understand the divine Words, could

not raise their vision to that of their Master's and were rebuked by Him:

Peter said, "Explain the parable to us," "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"

Matthew 15:15-17 NIV

The Redeemer Does Not Come to Ratify Traditional Interpretations

It would be utterly irrational and egotistical for anyone to believe and to expect that the divine Interpreter, the supreme Savior and Redeemer of the world, should come simply to confirm or ratify the conflicting creeds of hundreds of denominations and millions of interpreters, including one's own interpretation of the Scriptures. Yet such an unfortunate and unfounded supposition prevails not only among the Christians, but among the followers of all faiths on a wide scale.

Those who persist in their claim that they know what a prophetic passage means, those who argue their point with the sole intention of winning the argument, without looking at all the evidence presented by the new Savior, should remember the following warning addressed to them:

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

Matthew 12:36-37 NIV

Those who stand humble before a new Message saying, "I don't know, and I am not sure, but I am willing to listen and to learn," are conforming to the Will of the Lord. Even if they fail to find the truth, at least they have tried. But those who close their minds saying "I know, and I know that I know," will do well to remember the following words of Jesus:

Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

John 9:41 NIV

To recognize how the attitude of “I know and I know that I am right” stifles the spirit of the search for truth, let us consider the following. Let us assume someone reads a passage about the advent of Jesus whose interpretation he doesn’t like. He is so sure of his knowledge as to pass immediate judgment. He stops searching. He pleases his ego by saying, “I knew all along that this was all false. I knew that’s not the way Jesus comes.” His ego becomes his stumbling-block. He disregards the possibility that he may be fallible, or that the answer to his objection may come later. He also ignores the fact that many have rejected his own Faith for the same reason.

Now, to rise above such obstacles, we need to shift from ego to humility, we need to reason with ourselves in this way: “A Savior does not come to verify or support my interpretation. He comes to reveal the divine Interpretation. If I act as if I know better, I am implying that He should come and ask me the right meanings. In that case I and everyone else would play the role of a Savior. Then, why even have a Savior?”

This is why, for the sake of avoiding such obstacles, we should begin with proofs and end with interpretation. This is why we should try first to recognize the authority, and once His validity is established, then submit to Him.

In understanding the truth, we have a duty that is clearly specified in the Scriptures—namely to be open-minded, to search, to have courage, to look at all the evidence before judging, to refrain from insisting on traditional interpretation, and to find and follow the specific standards God has established as the touchstone of truth. If we act as God has commanded, we cannot but find the truth. (These standards constitute the main theme of Volumes I, II, III, and V.)

A Brief Review of Traditional Expectations

When someone declines to acknowledge the interpretation of the divine Interpreter, he in effect assumes or expresses the belief that: “My knowledge of the Scriptures stands above yours. The fact that you have come with mighty proofs does not matter. The only way I can be convinced is to see you perform spectacular and mighty miracles. To be acceptable to me, you must meet all the traditional expectations I have been taught, throughout my whole life, and told to be true:”

“You must come from heavenly spheres seated on the clouds in blazing fire with power and great glory, accompanied by the angels, witnessed by every eye; then you must sound the trumpet, raise the dead, and sit upon the heavenly throne, invested with undiminished might and majesty. You must come with a crown of gold on your head and a sharp sickle in your hand and a sword in your mouth to harvest the earth; further the sun and the moon must withdraw their light, the stars darken and fall, the moon turn into blood, the heaven depart as a scroll, with a new one spread out in its stead; there must be a new earth adorned with a new Jerusalem sent from above; the heavens must be on fire, dissolved with fervent heat, void and without form; there must be blood and fire and drifting smoke; the celestial powers must be shaken; everything must be made new; the mountains and the hills and the islands must move, every valley be exalted and every hill made low; all the birds of heaven must flee, a fire must rage burning God’s enemies, with the slain of the Lord lying from one end of the earth to the other, unlamented and unburied; the world must be made empty and desolate, turned upside down, with its inhabitants scattered abroad.”

References for the preceding prophecies: Isa. 24:1; 42:13; 65:17; 40:4; Rev. 21:5; 14:14; 6:14-17; 1:7; Jer. 4:7; 4:23-26; 25:33; Psa. 97:3; II Pet. 3:12-13; I Thess. 4:16-17; II Thess. 1:7; Matt. 24:29-31; Acts 2:19-21; Hag. 2:6; Joel 2:10,31. (The Bahá’í interpretation of many of these prophecies and the reasons they should be regarded as symbolic will follow in succeeding chapters.)

According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, all these prophecies convey inner meanings, not concrete realities. If taken literally, any one of these stupendous events would by itself stagger the human imagination; the result of their combined effect is unthinkable. This is precisely how the literal-minded Jews responded to Christ at the dawn of His first advent; they expected the literal fulfillment of all the prophecies; they allowed their ego to infect their intellect, to engulf and darken their pure and radiant vision; they insisted and persisted in their own fallible and unfounded interpretation.

Every sincere seeker of truth should recognize that a judgment based on the interpretation of symbolic words is utterly unreliable. For one can readily err in his understanding of the symbols, but no one who is motivated and guided by sincere and pure motives can ever misjudge the proofs of divine Revelation, for they stand on simple laws of reasoning, accessible to everyone, at any time.

This is why nothing suffices but the established proofs, and nothing can guide but the specific standards advocated in all the scriptures. Even a seeker of truth with no schooling whatever can readily taste the sweetness of the fruits of the divine Messenger, can discern His incomparable distinction. For the first and foremost requirement in recognizing the truth is a heart undefiled by preconceived beliefs, and a soul pure from worldly desires. Bahá'u'lláh declares:

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding. Well is it with the sincere in heart for their share of the light of a mighty Day!³

The Opening of the Book

As stated, the opening of the Book, or the unsealing of the mysteries, by the Messenger of our age, is prophesied in all the scriptures. For instance, Chapter 6 of the Book of Revelation is

devoted entirely to this subject. (Other references: Dan. 7:9-10; II Pet. 1:20; Rev. 5:1-5; 5:9-10; 8:1; 10:1,2,7,8; 20:11-12; 22:10.)

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in their prolific works (encompassing over a hundred volumes) have unsealed and uncovered not only the symbolic words of the past Messengers but also new truths never before revealed—truths, which as Jesus testified, people of His age “could not bear” (John 16:12). Bahá'u'lláh refers repeatedly to the unsealing of the mysteries by His Pen:

The Most Great Law hath been revealed... Every hidden thing hath been brought to light, by virtue of the Will of the Supreme Ordainer, He Who hath ushered in the Last Hour...⁴

And again:

Through Him the mysteries have been unraveled, the veils rent asunder and the signs and evidences disclosed. Lo! He hath now been made manifest. He bringeth to light whatsoever He willeth, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, invested with transcendent majesty and power.⁵

Even though many truths have been revealed, there remain many others as yet undisclosed:

Behold, how many are the mysteries that lie as yet unraveled within the tabernacle of the knowledge of God, and how numerous the gems of His wisdom that are still concealed in His inviolable treasures!⁶

And again:

Notwithstanding all that We have mentioned, how innumerable are the pearls which have remained unpierced in the shell of Our heart! How many the húrís* of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom!⁷

To Summarize:

- The right to interpret the symbolic words is given solely to the Savior of the age.

* A word implying concealed meanings endowed with beauty, charm and grace.

- Traditional interpretation of prophecies leads to unreasonable conclusions—the total reordering of the universe.
- In fulfillment of the prophecies, both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh have “opened the divine Book,” unveiling its mysteries in over a hundred volumes.

15

The Symbolism of Heavenly Signs

The Book of Certitude, the Key to Prophetic Symbols

The key to the main concepts offered in this book is provided by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Book of Certitude* (*The Kitáb-i-Íqán*). To become more acquainted with the original source, it seems fitting to introduce further passages reflecting Bahá'u'lláh's own words.

Kitáb-i-Íqán is a majestic book, invested with a grace and beauty that defy description; it “unseals” and unveils the mysteries that had been kept secret since the dawn of history. Those wishing to expand their knowledge of the symbols can benefit immensely by reading the whole book.

In this chapter we will examine the symbolism of the heavenly signs prophesied in Chapter 24 of Matthew (verses 29-31) and interpreted by Bahá'u'lláh in His *Book of Certitude*. These passages constitute a most widely quoted source of prophecy on the return of Christ. In His interpretation, Bahá'u'lláh progressively unveils each of the key terms used in the prophecy—terms such as heaven, angels, trumpet, heavenly descent, clouds, the stars, the sun, the moon, and power and glory. And in many instances He offers several meanings for a given symbol. For the sake of brevity, in most cases only one of these meanings is introduced here.

Let us now quote the prophetic words of Christ and then study its key words progressively under separate headings:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:29-31 NKJ

The Symbolism of Power and Glory

The masses of Christians expect Christ to come with literal glory and power. Bahá'u'lláh states that the glory referred to in the prophecies is spiritual, not material; it is heavenly, not earthly:

Therefore, know thou of a certainty that these Luminaries of heavenly majesty, though their dwelling be in the dust, yet their true habitation is the seat of glory in the realms above. Though bereft of all earthly possessions, yet they soar in the realms of immeasurable riches. And whilst sore tried in the grip of the enemy, they are seated on the right hand of power and celestial dominion. Amidst the darkness of their abasement there shineth upon them the light of unfading glory, and upon their helplessness are showered the tokens of an invincible sovereignty.¹

To discern the true meaning of glory bestowed on God's Messengers, it is well to make a study of this term as used in relation to the first advent of Christ. We know Christ was deprived of all earthly power and glory, yet He was frequently pictured in the light of glory:

But we see Jesus...crowned with glory and honor... Hebrews 2:9

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

Matthew 28:18

The Word became flesh... We have seen his glory... John 1:14 NIV

Not only Jesus, but Bahá'u'lláh as well in spite of seeming lowliness, declared His divine glory:

I have come in the shadows of the clouds of glory, and am invested by God with invincible sovereignty.²

The Gospel abounds with words ascribing glory and power to Christ. Here are further references: John 3:35; 12:41; 13:31; 17:1-2,5,22,24; 1:14; Luke 22:69,38; 24:25-27; Rev. 1:5; I Cor. 15:27; II Cor. 12:9; 13:4; 2:15; II Thess. 2:8; Matt. 11:27; 28:17-18.

Again we see an example of double standard in interpreting the Scriptures. When we read or hear the word glory in relation to the first advent of Christ we take it symbolically, but when we read or hear the same word in relation to the Second Advent we shift from symbolic to literal, from heavenly to earthly power.

In addition to studying the use of the words “glory and power” in the Scriptures, we can also study other prophecies about the second advent, prophecies that utterly reject the Redeemer’s inclination to earthly power and glory; for instance, prophecies pointing to His coming as a thief in the night, His sufferings, and His condemnation by the masses of people. These prophecies have already been presented.

To recognize true glory and true power, let us make a simple comparison: in terms of earthly power and glory, who was greater, Alexander the Great or Jesus of Nazareth? Alexander wore the crown of a kingdom that extended almost to the known boundaries of the earth. Jesus wore a crown of thorn. Who was the real King? How many congregations meet today in the name of Alexander? Who had by far the greater power, the deeper influence in the hearts and minds of millions for centuries, the poor man from Galilee or Alexander the Great?

God’s Messengers never glory in the earthly splendors; they glory in the adversities they endure for the sake of humanity. That is one way they distinguish themselves from others, that is how they prove their devotion and dedication, their love for God and man. If they

lived in luxury their words would have little, if any, influence in the hearts of the seekers of knowledge.

The misconception about the worldly glory of Jesus is so widespread and so taken for granted that it requires further study. Therefore, in this section, it will receive further examination.

The Symbolism of Heaven or Heavenly Descent

Let us now see what is meant by the word “heaven,” for the Redeemer is prophesied to descend from heaven. “Heaven,” too, is symbolic. Let us first see Bahá’u’lláh’s words expounding the meaning of “heaven” or “heavenly descent:”

The term “heaven” denoteth loftiness and exaltation, inasmuch as it is the seat of the revelation of those Manifestations of Holiness, the Day-springs of ancient glory. These ancient Beings, though delivered from the womb of their mother, have in reality descended from the heaven of the will of God. Though they be dwelling on this earth, yet their true habitations are the retreats of glory in the realms above. Whilst walking amongst mortals, they soar in the heaven of the divine presence. Without feet they tread the path of the spirit, and without wings they rise unto the exalted heights of divine unity. With every fleeting breath they cover the immensity of space, and at every moment traverse the kingdoms of the visible and the invisible.³

Does Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretation receive the support of the Scriptures? Let us see. First, the meaning of “heavenly descent” was clarified by Jesus when He said that He came from heaven, yet we know He was born on earth:

I have come down from heaven...*

John 6:38 NEB

See also John 6:42, 51; 3:13-14

Here is another reference not cited earlier:

* The meaning of heaven and heavenly descent have already been discussed. See Chapter 3.

And I shall draw all men to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth.

John 12:33 NEB

If we take the words literally, we find that they remained unfulfilled, for at no time did Jesus (after He was lifted to the cross or to heaven) lift all the people to Himself. What He did lift were the spirits of the true believers, for they all ascended to heavenly horizons.

Many Christians believe that at the time of the advent of Christ they will be lifted from the ground to meet the Lord in the air. Again by taking the words of Christ in His first advent on “lifting” symbolically and by taking the words of Paul literally, they are applying two standards of interpretation to the words of the Scriptures.

Here is another passage from Christ indicating the unique language the divine Messengers use:

And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:20 NIV

In the preceding words Jesus conveyed three messages coded in symbols:

- I will be with you
- always
- to the very end of the age

Here is what He meant:

- He wanted His followers to know that death could not separate Him from them. So His presence was spiritual.
- By “always,” He meant the entire duration of His dispensation or the age of prophecy.
- “The very end of the age” simply explained the meaning of “always.” The phrase signaled the end of the age of Christian dispensation as well as all other dispensations.

The symbolism of Clouds

The prophecies also indicate that the expected Redeemer will appear over the clouds. As a symbol, clouds stand for several meanings. Here is one as unveiled by Bahá'u'lláh:

By the term “clouds” is meant those things that are contrary to the ways and desires of men... These “clouds” signify, in one sense, the annulment of laws, the abrogation of former Dispensations, the repeal of rituals and customs current amongst men, the exalting of the illiterate faithful above the learned opposers of the Faith. In another sense, they mean the appearance of that immortal Beauty in the image of mortal man, with such human limitations as eating and drinking, poverty and riches, glory and abasement, sleeping and waking, and such other things as cast doubt in the minds of men, and cause them to turn away. All such veils are symbolically referred to as “clouds.”

... Even as the clouds prevent the eyes of men from beholding the sun, so do these things hinder the souls of men from recognizing the light of the divine Luminary.⁴

Bahá'u'lláh then quotes this verse from the Qur'án, which shows that people raised the same objections against Muhammad:

What manner of apostle [Messenger] is this? He eateth food, and walketh the streets. Unless an angel be sent down and take part in His warnings, we will not believe. Qur'án 25:7

Bahá'u'lláh continues:

As these holy Persons were subject to such needs and wants, the people were, consequently, lost in the wilds of misgivings and doubts, and were afflicted with bewilderment and perplexity. How, they wondered, could such a person be sent down from God, assert His ascendancy over all the peoples and kindreds of the earth, and claim Himself to be the goal of all creation... and yet be subject to such trivial things?⁵

What purpose do the clouds serve? As already stated, they constitute the means of testing the sincerity and purity of the seekers. How can he who is engulfed by fantasy, egotism, (I am the first to know the truth), conformity, closed-mindedness, and the cares of the world discern the light of truth? He can discern as much as his ego allows him—no more. Indeed all the divine Messengers ride over the clouds of illusions and misconceptions. The heaven of divine Faith always carries the clouds, especially at the dawn of new dispensations, the time of the advent of new Messengers, when the intervening

misdeeds, misjudgments, and idle thoughts and fantasies turn so thick and dark as to obstruct the view of all but the most discerning seekers. They must be thick to bear the divine Messenger; they must be dark to becloud His splendor, for His light is intense and dazzling.

All those weighed down with misjudgments remain earth bound; those free from earthly obstacles and attachments rise to the heavenly horizons, above the clouds, discerning the light of divine guidance, the glimmerings of the glory of God dawning with the utmost splendor.

The dawn of every dispensation is the time of separation (Matt. 13:30), the season of harvesting “the harvest is the end of the age” (Matt. 13:39 NIV), a time when “the righteous will shine as brightly as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43 NEB), an interval of testing or judging “he will judge the world with justice” (Acts 17:31 NIV; Psa. 72:2).

The Muslim scriptures, too, associate the advent of the Lord with “clouds” and “smoke.” Bahá’u’lláh quotes this verse:

On the day when the heaven shall give out a palpable smoke,
which shall enshroud mankind: this will be an afflictive
torment. Qur’án 44:10

In the following passage once again Bahá’u’lláh refers to the meaning of smoke and clouds and then goes on to indicate how they obscure the vision of the undeserving:

The All-Glorious hath decreed these very things, that are contrary to the desires of wicked men, to be the touchstone and standard whereby He proveth His servants, that the just may be known from the wicked, and the faithful distinguished from the infidel. The symbolic term “smoke” denotes grave dissensions, the abrogation and demolition of recognized standards, and the utter destruction of their narrow-minded exponents.⁶

And again:

What smoke more dense and overpowering than the one which hath now enshrouded all the peoples of the world, which hath become a torment unto them, and from which they hopelessly fail to deliver themselves, however much they strive? So fierce

is this fire of self-burning within them, that at every moment they seem to be afflicted with fresh torments. The more they are told that this wondrous Cause of God, this Revelation from the Most High, hath been made manifest to all mankind, and is waxing greater and stronger every day, the fiercer groweth the blaze of the fire in their hearts.⁷

Let us now review some biblical references to “cloud.” The following verses all demonstrate the symbolism of “cloud” as unveiled in the Bahá’í Scriptures:

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...
Zephaniah 1:15 NIV

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...
Joel 2:1-2 NIV

He [the Lord] parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet.
II Samuel 22:10 NIV

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.
Isaiah 60:1-2 NIV

Anything that veils the truth is symbolized as cloud. Among such veils is the body of the Messenger, which embodies weakness and lowliness. Those who expect earthly glory are blocked by the Savior’s appearance. His body stands between His divine glory and people’s superficial judgment. No wonder Christ said: “happy is the man who does not find me a stumbling-block” (Luke 7:23 NEB). He also said: “no prophet is recognized in his own country” (Luke 4:25 NEB).

Had some of us who adore Jesus in the 20th century, in the heart of Christian civilization, lived in the first century in Galilee, we would be the first to reject Him. For our present idealized image of Him does not correspond to what He really was.

Several prophecies use “cloud” to refer to the physical essence of the divine Messenger. Some of them establish a close link between “the Glory of God” or “the Glory of the Lord,” and “clouds” or “pillars of clouds.”

Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown...

Ezekiel 1:26-28 NIV

Here are a few other examples:

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple. Then Solomon said, “The Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud...”

I Kings 8:10-12 NIV

Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the Lord rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the Lord.

Ezekiel 10:3-4 NIV

And the Lord came down in a cloud, and spake unto him...

Numbers 11:25

Then the Lord appeared at the Tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood over the entrance to the Tent. Deuteronomy 31:15 NIV

Here is still one more passage containing several symbols, including “cloud,” “heaven,” and “seeing” in close succession:

At this the High Priest rose and said to him, “Have you no answer to the charge that these witnesses bring against you?” But Jesus kept silence. The High Priest then said, “By the living God I charge you to tell us: Are you the Messiah, the Son of

God?” Jesus replied, “The words are yours. But I tell you this: from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.” At these words the High Priest tore his robes and exclaimed, “Blasphemy! Need we call further witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What is your opinion?” “He is guilty,” they answered; “he should die.”

Matthew 26:62-66 NEB

Did any of those addressed by Christ ever see Him at the right hand of God? Did they see Him coming on the clouds? We have no choice but to acknowledge that the divine language is unique, often reflecting mysteries that must be decoded only by the One endowed with divine Knowledge.

The numerous passages cited earlier (II These. 2:3-4 and others) on the darkness of our day—in selfishness, worldliness, and remoteness from God—further support the symbolism of clouds as declared by Bahá’u’lláh. The prophecies predicting that the Redeemer will come as a thief in the night (spiritual darkness), and that He will be rejected and condemned, further point to the egotistical clouds of our day. (Other references indicating the symbolic use of “clouds:” Ex. 16:10; 24:16-17; 40:36-38; 34:5; 19:9; 33:9-10; Lev. 16:2; Num. 9:15-23; 10:11,33-34. See also *Paris Talks*, pp. 43-45.)

Let us conclude the present discussion with an excerpt from one of Bahá’u’lláh’s meditations:

Thou beholdest, O my God, how bewildered in their drunkenness are Thy servants who have turned back from Thy beauty and caviled at what hath been sent down from the right hand of the throne of Thy majesty. Thou didst come, O my God, in the clouds of Thy spirit and Thine utterance, and lo, the entire creation shook and trembled, and the limbs of them who repudiated Thy testimonies were made to quiver, O Thou in Whose grasp is the lordship of all things!⁸

The Symbolism of the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars

To study the symbolism of the heavenly lights (the sun, the moon, and the stars), let us first review a few biblical references on each

source of light and then study these three sources of enlightenment together, to see more closely their relationships.

The Sun. One of the events expected to unfold in the last days is the darkening of the sun (Matt. 24:29). Bahá'u'lláh states that the word “sun” as used by Jesus in relation to His return is symbolic:

By the terms “sun” and “moon,” mentioned in the writings of the Prophets of God, is not meant solely the sun and moon of the visible universe. Nay rather, manifold are the meanings they have intended for these terms. In every instance they have attached to them a particular significance. Thus, by the “sun” in one sense is meant those Suns of Truth Who rise from the dayspring of ancient glory, and fill the world with a liberal effusion of grace from on high.⁹

And again:

Thus it is that through the rise of these Luminaries of God the world is made new, the waters of everlasting life stream forth, the billows of loving-kindness surge, the clouds of grace are gathered, and the breeze of bounty bloweth upon all created things. It is the warmth that these Luminaries of God generate, and the undying fires they kindle, which cause the light of the love of God to burn fiercely in the heart of humanity. It is through the abundant grace of these Symbols of Detachment that the Spirit of life everlasting is breathed into the bodies of the dead. Assuredly the visible sun is but a sign of the splendor of that Day-star of Truth, that Sun Which can never have a peer, a likeness, or rival. Through Him all things live, move, and have their being. Through His grace they are made manifest, and unto Him they all return.¹⁰

The Báb writes:

Verily, the sun is but a token from My presence so that the true believers among My servants may discern in its rising the dawning of every Dispensation.¹¹

(See also *Paris Talks*, pp. 30-33 for a further comparison of the sun and the Sun of Truth.)

Let us now review the biblical references pointing to “the sun” as the source of spiritual enlightenment:

For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. Psalms 84:11 NIV

But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings... Malachi 4:2 NIV

The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end. Isaiah 60:19-20 NIV

The city [the world enlightened by the new Revelation] does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God [Bahá'u'lláh] gives it light, and the Lamb [the Báb] is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. Revelation 21:23-25 NIV

They will see his [God's] face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. Revelation 22:4-5 NIV

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh confirm the fulfillment of the preceding prophecies:

I the Báb] am the Primal Point from which have been generated all created things. I am the Countenance of God Whose splendor can never be obscured, the Light of God Whose radiance can never fade. Whoso recognizeth Me, assurance and all good are in store for him, and whoso faileth to recognize Me, infernal fire and all evil await him.¹²

This is the Day, O my Lord, whose brightness Thou hast exalted above the brightness of the sun and the splendors thereof. I testify that the light it sheddeth proceedeth out of the glory of the light

of Thy countenance, and is begotten by the radiance of the morn of Thy Revelation. This is the Day whereon the hopeless have been clothed with the raiment of confidence, and the sick attired with the robe of healing, and the poor drawn nigh unto the ocean of Thy riches.¹³

The Stars. The falling of the stars is another expectation cherished by many, especially the Christians. “The stars,” like “the moon” is also used symbolically in the Scriptures. Here are Bahá’u’lláh’s words on one of the many meanings of “the stars:”

In another sense, by these terms is intended the divines [religious leaders] of the former Dispensation, who live in the days of the subsequent Revelations, and who hold the reins of religion in their grasp. If these divines be illumined by the light of the latter Revelation they will be acceptable unto God, and will shine with a light everlasting. Otherwise, they will be declared as darkened, even though to outward seeming they be leaders of men, inasmuch as belief and unbelief, guidance and error, felicity and misery, light and darkness, are all dependent upon the sanction of Him Who is the Day-star of Truth. Whosoever among the divines of every age receiveth, in the Day of Reckoning, the testimony of faith from the Source of true knowledge, he verily becometh the recipient of learning, of divine favor, and of the light of true understanding. Otherwise, he is branded as guilty of folly, denial, blasphemy, and oppression.

It is evident and manifest unto every discerning observer that even as the light of the star fadeth before the effulgent splendor of the sun, so doth the luminary of earthly knowledge, of wisdom, and understanding vanish into nothingness when brought face to face with the resplendent glories of the Sun of Truth, the Day-star of divine enlightenment.¹⁴

The fading or falling of “the stars” at the dawning of divine light is also confirmed by the Báb:

The acts of Him Whom God shall make manifest [Bahá’u’lláh] are like unto the sun, while the works of men, provided they conform to the good-pleasure of God, resemble the stars or the moon...Thus, should the followers of the Bayán [the Báb’s Holy

Book] observe the precepts of Him Whom God shall make manifest at the time of His appearance, and regard themselves and their own works as stars exposed to the light of the sun, then they will have gathered the fruits of their existence; otherwise the title of “starship” will not apply to them. Rather it will apply to such as truly believe in Him, to those who pale into insignificance in the day-time and gleam forth with light in the night season.¹⁵

John the Revelator in His vision of the last days observed an image: “one like unto the Son of man,” namely the expected Redeemer of our age. Here is part of his description:

...I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was some “like a son of man”...In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

Revelation 1:12-16 NIV

Here is a passage quite rare in its kind, for it contains both the symbol and its interpretation:

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Revelation 1:20 NIV

Here are a few others:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.*

Revelation 12:1

And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercury, because he was the chief speaker.

Acts 14:12 American Standard Version

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for Joy?

Job 38:7

Daniel in his vision of the last days was told by Gabriel that the prophecies were sealed until the end of the age. He was further

* This prophecy was interpreted in Volume I.

informed that at that time only the wise leaders will be able to understand the intended meaning of the prophecies:

Go your way, Daniel, for the words are kept secret and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall purify themselves and be refined, making themselves shining white, but the wicked shall continue in wickedness and none of them shall understand; only the wise leaders shall understand. Daniel 12:9-10 NEB

The same vision also indicates:

The wise leaders shall shine like the bright vault of heaven, and those who have guided the people in the true path shall be like the stars for ever and ever. Daniel 12:3 NEB

Another prophecy by Isaiah clearly confirms Daniel's vision. For he too refers to "the sealing or closing" of the Book and the inability of many to understand the intended meaning of divine Words. Here is Isaiah's prophecy:

All prophetic vision has become for you like a sealed book. Give such a book to one who can read and say, "Come, read this;" he will answer, "I cannot, because it is sealed." Give it to one who cannot read and say, "Come, read this;" he will answer, "I cannot read." Then the Lord said: Because this people approach me with their mouths and honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me, and their religion is but a precept of men, learnt by rote, therefore I will yet again shock this people, adding shock to shock: the wisdom of their wise men shall vanish and the discernment of the discerning shall be lost. Isaiah 29:11-14 NEB

Daniel's vision and Isaiah's words are related in many ways. One chief element in both prophecies is the use of the word "wise" or "wisdom," which is said to be scarce during the last days. But the chief point related to the present discussion is the statement by Daniel that "the wise leaders, namely those who guide the people to the path of divine knowledge, shall shine like the stars of heaven. What happens to the wise who are shining like the star, when they lose their wisdom, as Isaiah predicts that they will? Don't they fall from their exalted position of enlightenment? Do they not fade away, even as Bahá'u'lláh confirms?

Bahá'u'lláh accords a lofty station to the religious leaders, the wise and the learned, but only if they enter the new heaven of divine Revelation, otherwise they lose their brightness, which is their wisdom. Similarly, when Christ told His followers that He would be with them to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20), He meant that they could receive His light during His dispensation; after that the companionship would fade away. Here are Bahá'u'lláh's words declaring the fall of the star of the religious leaders:

O concourse of bishops! Ye are the stars of the heaven of My knowledge. My mercy desireth not that ye should fall upon the earth. My justice, however, declareth: 'This is that which the Son (Jesus) hath decreed.' And whatsoever hath proceeded out of His blameless, His truth-speaking, trustworthy mouth, can never be altered.¹⁶

And again:

The stars of the heaven of knowledge have fallen, they who...make mention of God in My Name. And yet, when I came unto them in My glory, they turned aside. They, indeed, are of the fallen.¹⁷

It may be helpful to point out that although the word "star" is used primarily in relation to religious leaders, the words "Morning-Star" and "Day-Star" are often used in relation to divine Messengers. The Morning-Star or Day-Star does not lose its visibility even before the light of the sun. In this sense even after the day-break, the Star does not fall from its position of enlightenment. In the following verse Christ calls Himself the Morning Star:

...I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star. Revelation 22:16

Bahá'u'lláh often refers to Himself and other Messengers as "Day-Stars:"

Invested though each day may be with its pre-ordained share of God's wondrous grace, the Days immediately associated with the Manifestation of God possess a unique distinction and occupy a station which no mind can ever comprehend. Such is the virtue infused into them that if the hearts of all that dwell in the heavens

and the earth were, in those days of everlasting delight, to be brought face to face with that Day Star of unfading glory and attuned to His Will, each would find itself exalted above all earthly things, radiant with His light, and sanctified through His grace.¹⁸

The Moon. Still another expectation associated with the advent of Christ is the darkening of the moon (“the moon shall not give her light”), or its turning into blood (Acts 2:30). Again Bahá’u’lláh teaches that “moon” is a metaphor; like the stars it stands for illumination. And in this sense it symbolizes the religious leaders who, because of the setting of the Sun of the dispensation in which they are authorized to rule, lose their light. Several of the references mentioned have already demonstrated the symbolic use of the moon. (See Isa. 60:19, and Rev. 21:23.)

The Symbolism of Light

Still another way we can understand the meaning of the sun, the moon, and the star is to take note of their common element. What these three sources of enlightenment have in common is light. And the word “light” is frequently applied to spiritual sources of guidance:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

Isaiah 9:2 NIV

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John 1:5 NIV

Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”

John 12:35-36 NIV

See also Revelation 21:23-26

Since God made us in His image, those of us who do not distort the image stand as the reflectors of His light. This honor is shared not only between God and His Mediators, but between the Mediators

and us as well. The main difference is that the Mediators receive the light from God, and we from the Mediators.

...God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. I John 1:5

God is the light of the heavens and of the earth. Qur'án 24:35

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12 NIV

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Matthew 5:14 NIV

See also II Samuel 23:4; Job 24:13; John 11:9; 12:46

Here is a prophecy from Isaiah referring specifically to our time. (We should remember that Bahá'u'lláh means both (the light and the glory of God.)

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Isaiah 60:1-3 NIV

Some prophecies point to the darkness of the sun and the moon, yet others indicate that their light will increase. Here is a passage pointing to the increase of the light:

The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the Lord binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted. Isaiah 30:26 NIV

If we recognize the symbolism of light, no contradiction arises between such prophecies. For as the sun and the moon of former dispensations disappear, a new sun and a new moon emerge to take their place. Because of greater capacity of the people in the new day, the divine light increases in intensity.

In His Paris Talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers further insight on the meaning of "light:"

There are two kinds of light. There is the visible light of the sun, by whose aid we can discern the beauties of the world around us—without this we could see nothing.

Nevertheless, though it is the function of this light to make things visible to us, it cannot give us the power to see them or to understand what their various charms may be, for this light has no intelligence, no consciousness. It is the light of the intellect which gives us knowledge and understanding, and without this light the physical eyes would be useless.

This light of the intellect is the highest light that exists, for it is born of the Light Divine.

The light of the intellect enables us to understand and realize all that exists, but it is only the Divine Light that can give us sight for the invisible things, and which enables us to see truths that will only be visible to the world thousands of years hence.¹⁹

The Islamic Sculptures also use the words the sun, the moon, and the stars symbolically to convey meanings identical with those conveyed in the biblical Scriptures. For a review of examples see *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 33-49.

After referring to the darkness of the sun and the moon and the falling of the stars, Jesus refers to the darkness of the time, the afflictions that engulf the human race at the age of His coming:

...then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn... Matthew 24:30

Bahá'u'lláh interprets this passage in this way:

These words signify that in those days men will lament the loss of the Sun of the divine beauty, of the Moon of knowledge, and of the Stars of divine wisdom.²⁰

As many prophecies point to the afflictions and trials of the last days, they also point to divine wrath, because people refuse God's commandments as well as His Messenger:

The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly...That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord...Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. In the fire

of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.

Zephaniah 1:14-18 NIV

See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire.

Isaiah 30:27 NIV

From the many passages reviewed, we can see how perfectly in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation the prophecies fit: for we are told that people will live in the darkness of worldliness and unbelief, that they will be surrounded by clouds of illusions, that they will not accept the light, that they will bewail and bemoan, that God will be displeased with them, and that they will face His wrath, the consequences of their own deeds and denials.

16

A Summary of the Symbols

The Material World Symbolizes the Spiritual

There is much in common between the spiritual and material worlds. We have a sun in both worlds that rises again and again to bring light and life. The dawn of every day begins with the rise of the sun, which moves to its zenith, and then at the appointed hour, as ordained by the Creator, conceals itself. Then after the concealment, a long interval begins, which is called “night.” (See *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 129.) The rise of the new sun gives rise to a new moon and new stars, which lead the voyagers until the dawn of the next day, when the sun rises and reigns again. For at its rising, the stars and the moon that had been beaming brightly fade away, falling into oblivion. They can no longer lead the voyagers; they have lost their light.

So as God has ordained a new day dawns and the sun appears again to bestow a new outpouring of love and light. The new sun stands as the only source of enlightenment until it sets again and another night begins with a new moon and new stars. Thus the religious cycles repeat themselves from age to age. As the Psalmist instructs:

Give thanks to the Lord of lords...who made the great lights—
the sun to govern the day...the moon and stars to govern the
night...

Psalms 136:3-9 NIV

Both worlds have also heavens, dawning-points, seasons, and clouds. In both worlds, the sun dawns from the East and in heaven, abides in heaven, and conceals itself in heaven. (For a more detailed comparison of the material and spiritual worlds, see *Bahá'í World Faith*, pp. 254-257.)

As for the clouds, they rise from the earth heavenward, not to touch the sun, but to conceal its splendor. They are earthly, not heavenly.

Those who rise above the clouds, see the sun beaming brightly with unmatched splendor. Those who stay under the clouds, see only gloom and darkness. For them the day seems like a starless night, for the gleaming stars have fallen by the light of the new day reigning beyond the clouds. They live in darkness and despair, thinking that the Prince of the Night is still in power.

If they would only awaken, if they would only discern the stirrings of the dawn, if they would only listen to the voice of their Creator who keeps calling:

O SON OF MAN!

Many a day hath passed over thee whilst thou hast busied thyself with thy fancies and idle imaginings. How long art thou to slumber on thy bed? Lift up thy head from slumber, for the Sun hath risen to the zenith, haply it may shine upon thee with the light of beauty.¹

The following prophecy by Zechariah (Father of John the Baptist) indeed summarizes several of the main symbols—symbols that still after the lapse of some 20 centuries stand as obstacles in the path of many seekers:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1:76-79 NIV

Let us now raise a few questions:

- Who was “the sun”? It was Jesus who followed John the Baptist.
- What was the heaven from which He descended? The heaven of a new Revelation, the heaven of divine Will.
- Who were those living in darkness? The unbelievers.
- What was the shadow of death? The shadow of spiritual death.

Here is another prophecy about our age containing several symbols:

The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.

Psalms 97:1-4 NIV

Let us again raise a few questions:

- What “earth” should rejoice? The earth of the hearts of the seekers.
- What clouds and darkness surround Him? The clouds of misconception and illusion, the darkness of unbelief.
- What “throne”? The throne of heavenly glory.
- Which “fire”? The fire of divine justice.
- How are His foes consumed? By being deprived of His light.
- Which “lightning lights up the world”? The lightning of His spiritual glory.
- Which world? The inner world.
- Which earth “sees” and which earth “trembles”? The earth of the hearts of the people.
- What are “the mountains that melt like wax”? They are the proud and the haughty. Those who occupy high position, especially the religious leaders who lose their high status.

Table of Symbols

Let us now summarize the symbols in the form of a table and apply the key provided in the Bahá'í scriptures to the chief riddles of the biblical scriptures:

<i>Symbols</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
The sun is darkened.	The light of the previous dispensation comes to an end.
The light of the sun is increased sevenfold.	The new Revelation shines with greater intensity. (“He will guide you unto all truth.”)
The stars fall, the moon darkens.	The dawn of the new day eliminates the light of those previously giving enlightenment to the people. The past teachings or laws are abrogated.
The Redeemer comes from heaven.	The Redeemer comes from the heaven of a new dispensation, the heaven of divine Will or divine Revelation.
The Redeemer comes over the clouds.	He appears over the clouds of misconceptions and fantasies. He shines through a physical instrument: the human body.
Every eye shall see him.	Those with insight shall see Him.
The angels descend.	Those “reinforced by the power of the spirit” appear in, or descend upon, the new world.
There is resurrection.	A new Redeemer rises to offer new life. He bestows the spirit of the age.
The balance is set.	The balance of divine judgment is set. People’s sincerity and open-mindedness is weighed.
The dead shall rise.	Those who receive the life of faith rise to a new horizon. The new believers are enraptured by the Spirit of God.
The dead shall cover the earth.	Those who fail to receive the life or the spirit of faith cover the earth.
Many are slain by the sword.	Many lose the life of faith by rejecting the word of God. (The word of God separates the people as the sword does.)

The world comes to an end.	The old age ends, and a new age dawns.
The heavens pass away.	The appointed time of the previous dispensations passes away. The heavens of the previous Revelations fade away.
A new heaven emerges.	A new dispensation dawns. Religion is renewed.
There are earthquakes.	The hearts are in turmoil and agitated. There is little if any peace of mind.
A new city (new Jerusalem) descends.	New teachings are revealed. A new divine civilization emerges.
There is no more night.	The hosts of light prevail over the forces of darkness. The Kingdom of God dawns.
The Redeemer sounds the trumpet.	He sounds the divine call by His pen or His words.
A new earth emerges.	The hearts of the believers are renewed. A new race of believers is created. (Earth is the receiver of the light.) The earth of understanding and knowledge is renewed.
The earth is harvested.	The hearts that are spiritually ripe and receptive are attracted and gathered together.
The heavens dissolve with fervent heat, becoming void and without form.	The heavens of the previous Revelations is consumed, becoming empty, without the sun, the moon, and the stars.
There is fire and smoke.	There is the fire of testing, the smoke of misunderstanding, idle fancies, and illusions.
Celestial powers are shaken.	The stability of previous Revelations is lost.
The mountains and hills move or dissolve.	The haughty and proud lose their spiritual powers.
The valleys are exalted.	The humble are exalted. The last are made the first.

The hills are made low.	The haughty are humiliated. The first are made the last.
The heavens are cleft asunder.	The heavens of the previous dispensations are superseded and annulled.
The heavens are folded.	The heavens of the previous dispensations are folded away.
The world is made empty and desolate.	The world becomes empty of spiritual virtues; it loses the light of God's guidance.
The world is turned upside down.	The old order crumbles.
All things are made new.	A new order with a new name emerges. "...for the old order has passed away!" (Rev. 21:4 NEB).

Selections from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings on Heavenly Signs

Let us end this chapter with a few excerpts from Bahá'u'lláh's Words pointing to the fulfillment of heavenly signs, especially those recorded in the Islámic Scriptures. These words are addressed to the Muslims, but they pertain to all humankind:

Speed out of your sepulchers. How long will ye sleep? The second blast hath been blown on the trumpet. On whom are ye gazing? This is your Lord, the God of Mercy. Witness how ye gainsay His signs! The earth hath quaked with a great quaking, and cast forth her burdens. Will ye not admit it? Say: Will ye not recognize how the mountains have become like flocks of wool, how the people are sore vexed at the awful majesty of the Cause of God? Witness how their houses are empty ruins, and they themselves a drowned host.

This is the Day whereon the All-Merciful hath come down in the clouds of knowledge, clothed with manifest sovereignty. He well knoweth the actions of men. He it is Whose glory none can mistake, could ye but comprehend it. The heaven of every religion

hath been rent, and the earth of human understanding been cleft asunder, and the angels of God are seen descending...The mountains have passed away, and the heavens have been folded together, and the whole earth is held within His grasp, could ye but understand it. Who is it that can protect you? None, by Him Who is the All-Merciful! None, except God, the Almighty, the All-Glorious...

Is there any doubt concerning God? Behold how He hath come down from the heaven of His grace, girded with power and invested with sovereignty. Is there any doubt concerning His signs? Open ye your eyes, and consider His clear evidence. Paradise is on your right hand, and hath been brought nigh unto you, while Hell hath been made to blaze. Witness its devouring flame. Haste ye to enter into Paradise, as a token of Our mercy unto you, and drink ye from the hands of the All-Merciful the Wine that is life indeed.²

Part of a prayer from Bahá'u'lláh:

Hold Thou the hand of this seeker who hath set his face towards Thee, O my Lord, and draw him out of the depths of his vain imaginations, that the light of certainty may shine brightly above the horizon of his heart in the days whereon the sun of the knowledge of Thy creatures hath been darkened through the shining of the Day-Star of Thy glory; the days whereon the moon of the world's wisdom hath been eclipsed through the appearance of Thy hidden knowledge...the days whereon the stars of men's doings have fallen through the rising of the orb of Thy unity and the shedding of the radiance of Thy transcendent oneness.³

Part V

Consistency, the Ultimate Test of Validity

Other than reviewing Bahá'u'lláh's credentials, there is another test we can apply to the Bahá'í interpretation, and that is the test of consistency. Briefly, if an interpretation can harmonize the words of the Scriptures so that they perfectly fit, without any contradiction or inconsistency, that interpretation is undoubtedly superior to any other that falls short of such an achievement. For, we may ask, if a reasonable thinker does not contradict himself, then how can the Creator, the Source of all Knowledge and Wisdom, contradict Himself?

17

Consistency of Interpretation an Evidence of Validity

Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation of the Scriptures is fresh and arresting; to some it may seem radical. If this is how it seems to you, please remember that new ideas like fresh seed can grow only with time. The words of Jesus seemed too radical to His contemporaries, but now after many centuries they are taken for granted. Already some of Bahá'u'lláh's interpretations of the Scriptures are being adopted both by the church and the layman alike.

If in spite of all the biblical evidence, you cannot still accept the interpretation offered by the new Revelation, please have patience until you have reviewed Bahá'u'lláh's credentials. For Bahá'u'lláh does not speak as a fallible man inevitably steeped in ignorance, but with the authority of God's Messenger and Redeemer to whom nothing remains hidden. Only when you feel justified to reject the credentials, are you justified to reject the interpretation.

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The spirit of error will lead us from the truth; and the Spirit of God will lead us into truth. But, say you, a man may be in an error, and think he has the truth. What then? We answer, the Spirit and word agree. If a man judges himself by the word of God, and finds a perfect harmony through the whole word, then he must believe he has the truth; but if he finds the spirit by which he is led does not harmonize with the whole tenor of God's law or Book, then let him walk carefully.¹

To use an analogy, the divine Words may be likened to a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces. Our goal is to put the pieces together. In our effort to assemble the pieces of the puzzle, we start with an open and unbiased mind. We do not decide in advance what shape the pieces should fall into. Without any preconceived notions, we fit the pieces together one by one, and then accept whatever shape emerges.

Our proof of being right is the perfect fit between the pieces. Such a test is quite simple and in harmony with the human mind. We need not be a scholar to recognize such reasoning. All we need is to be ourselves, to use the simple laws of thinking that the Creator has granted to all His children.

To demonstrate the point, let us consider a few examples of traditional interpretation and the contradictions they lead to:

- Jesus said He came from heaven, yet He was born.
- Jesus said John the Baptist was the return of Elijah; John said he was not Elijah
- Jesus said that at His coming the sun will be darkened; Isaiah said the light of the sun shall increase sevenfold.
- Jesus said that He shall come like a thief in the night. He also said He shall come with such a glory as to be seen by every eye.
- To awaken His faithful followers to the news of His coming, Jesus said "Watch!" He also said that every eye will see Him. If every eye will see Him, why would one need to watch?
- Jesus told His followers that He would be with them always, yet He left them.

- Jesus told His persecutors that from now on they would see Him on the right Hand of God. Yet such a prediction did not come literally true.
- The Old Testament had predicted that whoever rejected the Savior would die. Yet literally this did not happen.
- The Old Testament predicted that the Messiah will be a king like David, the pride of Israel. Instead of a king, the Jews received a poor man born in a stable. (See the references for these prophecies in the preceding chapters.)

Many other examples could be cited, and will be cited in the next chapter. But even the few mentioned demonstrate the danger of literal-mindedness, the fallacy of traditional interpretations of the Scriptures.

Inadequacies of Literal Interpretation

Further, if some of the heavenly events did take place literally, what purpose would they serve? If the sun either became dark or if its light increased by sevenfold, what would be the purpose of all this? It seems strange that God would alter the universal order He has established for countless eons and ages.

It is instructive to note that the Muslims' expectations of the coming of the last day and the Lord of the age are almost identical with those of the Christians. Here are Bahá'u'lláh's words in relation to a verse in the Qur'án prophesying that at the last day the heavens will be folded:

And now, comprehend the meaning of this verse: "The whole earth shall on the Resurrection Day be but His handful, and in His right hand shall the heavens be folded together..." [Qur'án 39:67]. 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? Moreover, it is evident and manifest that no such hand as could be seen by human eye could accomplish such deeds, or could possibly be ascribed to the exalted Essence of the one true God.²

Taking the prophetic symbols literally leads to still further problems: it causes rift and conflict between religious and scientific truths. Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation combines and harmonizes all scientific and spiritual realities. For instance, according to Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation, we need not hold to the traditional but mistaken notion that God made the world in six days or that the world came into being only six thousand years ago, assumptions contradicted by well-established scientific facts. The basic facts of creation as recorded both in the Bible and the Qur'án have spiritual—not material—significance. Here are the words of the Bible followed by those of the Qur'án:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. Genesis 2:1-2

Verily your Lord is God who hath made the Heavens and the Earth in six days, then mounted his throne to rule all things... This is God your Lord; therefore serve him. Will ye not reflect? Qur'án 10:2

The preceding passages contain several key terms that need clarifying. One term is “day.” That “a day with the Lord is like a thousand years” is a fact confirmed both in the Bible and the Qur'án:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. II Peter 3:8 NIV

For a thousand years in your [God's] sight are like a day that has just gone by... Psalms 90:4 NIV

...And verily, a day with thy Lord is as a thousand years, as ye reckon them!*

Qur'án 22:46

* Please note the perfect similarity between these verses. They all indicate that “with the Lord” or “in His sight” a day is like a thousand years. They all refer to our Creator, His scheme of Creation, and the duration of time in His estimation. But when the prophecies refer to humans, the yard stick of time changes. For the symbolic, or prophetic day, for humans is only one year:

I have appointed thee each day for a year. Ezekiel 4:6

The preceding passages on creation contain two other key terms whose meanings have already been clarified. One term is “heaven,” which symbolizes “the heaven of divine Revelation;” and the other is “earth,” which exemplifies “the human heart.”

Now let us put the facts together and examine them in the light of the knowledge provided by Bahá’u’lláh. Let us see what is meant by God creating the heavens and the earth in six days, and His resting, or sitting on the throne, on the seventh day.

As we have cycles in the material world, so do we in the spiritual world. The whole universe revolves around cycles. (For instance, human life consists of a succession of cycles; seasons and heavenly bodies follow cycles.) We live in a cycle that dates back about 6,000 years (in biblical terms six days), an era whose dawning marked a new beginning in human history—a new awareness, a new birth.

As mentioned, God’s Wisdom ordains that every potential unfold itself gradually. As a child grows through various stages of development, so did humankind as a whole. Therefore man’s spiritual creation extended over a span of time. From the critical point that marks the inception of human history up to the present time (the beginning of maturity), it took six days or 6,000 years. During these six days, the divine Revelation continued to descend from heaven to prepare the earth of the human heart for the dawning of a new day, when the stress and strain of growing up would cease, when social and spiritual creation would complete its sharp upward cycle, when everything would be ready for God Himself to rule.

The first six millenniums (six days) represent the various stages of man’s spiritual growth toward maturity, the seventh millennium (seventh day) stands for the stage of maturity or fulfillment. Now we are witnessing the dawn of the seventh day, the day of the Lord, when God Himself has descended upon the throne to rule.

As stated, many prophecies indicate that during “the time of the end,” (namely the end of the so called Adamic Cycle), God Himself will come:

And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have awaited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have

waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Isaiah 25:9

For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 23:39

...Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

Zechariah 14:5 NIV

...and thy Lord shall come and the angels rank on rank...

Qur'án 89:23

What can such expect but that God should come down to them overshadowed with clouds...

Qur'án 2:206

Humankind has been expecting the dawning of God's kingdom on earth for thousands of years. Such a kingdom, as ordained by the Creator, could not be established without adequate groundwork, without setting a stage on which to build. During the 6,000 years of recorded history humanity has gone through much struggling, growing up, and maturing. And now, in our time, it has potentially reached the stage of full growth (or potential perfection), when the time of creation or preparation is nearing its end (the End of the time of preparation), soon to be followed by the millennium of peace, the period of divine rule.

Such an interpretation of creation not only gives a rational meaning to the words of the Scriptures, not only does it stand in harmony with all the prophetic truths, it also withstands the test of reason, rising above and standing in harmony with all scientific precepts.

To Conclude

In the light of their inner meanings, the divine Words attain complete harmony not only among themselves, but with scientific and rational realities as well.

Trying to comprehend God's Words without the new knowledge is like trying to read in the dark. Once the heavenly light shed by Bahá'u'lláh is allowed to radiate unhindered upon the Scriptures, there emerges from beneath the chaotic and contending creeds and

interpretations of people a most wondrous and majestic profile—
one of beauty, consistency, and order.

Bahá'u'lláh command of the Scriptures and His reconciling of the seemingly conflicting words of the holy Ones of the past is in itself an evidence of His heavenly glory and divine distinction. It is astounding how as a result of the knowledge unveiled by this mighty Revelation one's total perception not only of religion but of the whole reality changes.

It is beyond the scope of this book to unseal all the symbolic words of God's Messengers. The passages cited here represent only a small token from the rich treasures of Bahá'u'lláh's Works. In addition to *The Book of Certitude*, another source of enlightenment on the meaning of symbolic words is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*, a book so rich with gems of knowledge as to be unmatched in all the literary works of the world.

18

Avoiding Double Standards of Interpretation

A most common practice among the followers of all religions is to apply two standards of interpretation to the words of their scriptures. They tend to overlook or otherwise take symbolically some of those words when they refer to the past, and take literally those same or similar words, when they refer to the future.

At the time of Jesus it was difficult for our forebears to understand the inner meaning of rebirth, but after many centuries, we have so adjusted our thinking as to see only the inner sense of the expression. We have outgrown our immature conception of rebirth. Yet when we read a similar statement in relation to a future event, especially the coming of the Kingdom, we suddenly shift our perspective and adopt an entirely new standard of interpretation, always based on the literal sense of the sign.

Why do we shift our perspective and alter our standard? Many reasons are involved; perhaps we tend to idolize or glamorize the future. Because of our inability to attain our utopian hopes and dreams, we have a tendency to fantasize, both consciously and unconsciously, that something unearthly and splendid, with almost no efforts on our part, is going to brighten our days and elevate and enchant our uncharted and dim destiny—a sudden miracle to cheer our lives, a dazzling drama to stir our stagnant hopes and aspirations.

Further, belief in the forthcoming miracles gives weight to and strengthens our beliefs, making them more credible. Let us now examine some examples of double standards.

Double Standards Applied to the Meaning of Life and Death

Few expressions have been put to symbolic use as often as “life and death,” especially “death.” It seems fitting to make still further studies of these two key words. It is the purpose of every Redeemer to bring spiritual life to the people. In order for a person to be reborn or to gain eternal or spiritual life two conditions are required:

- Recognition and love of God
- Obedience to His teachings as revealed by His latest Messenger.

In the following two selections Christ refers to both conditions:

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

John 11:25-26

In very truth I tell you, if anyone obeys my teaching he shall never know what it is to die. The Jews said, ‘Now we are certain that you are possessed. Abraham is dead; the prophets are dead; and yet you say, “If anyone obeys my teaching he shall not know what it is to die.” Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? The prophets are dead too. What do you claim to be?’

John 8:51-53 NEB

Obviously in these verses Christ is referring to spiritual, not physical, death. For death overtakes all—both saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers. What He seeks to convey is that through the life-giving power of faith and the light of divine teachings, the believer rises from spiritual unconsciousness to awareness, escapes from the ravages of death and darkness (remoteness from God), not

only in this world but in all the worlds to come—eternally. Here is another passage on “death:”

...Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. II Timothy 1:10

Let us now apply the test of double standards to “life and death.” When we read the phrase “shall never die” or “has abolished death,” we know what they mean; we have learned from experience that physical death makes no exceptions and knows no favors—it subdues all flesh. Yet when we encounter a similar phrase in relation to the future, we suddenly and unwittingly shift our perspective—from the hard facts of reality into the ethereal illusions of fantasy. When we read that at the time of the end the dead shall rise, we assume that “the dead” are our forebears—not us. After all, who—which living soul—consents to calling itself dead?

Similarly when we read that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), we know that the “death” referred to is spiritual—not physical—for we see the sinners living side by side with the saints. We know death in this passage stands for deprivation from spiritual bounties—faith, hope, enlightenment, nearness to God. But when we read a similar theme in relation to the last day, we immediately begin to dream of the spectacular.

For instance, when we read that: “At that time those slain by the Lord will be everywhere—from one end of the earth to the other” (Jer. 25:33 NIV), we are not likely to think that the prophecy refers to the spiritually slain—the masses of people who refuse to recognize the Redeemer, a fact supported by many other prophecies.

Likewise when we read: “no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die.” (John 11:26 NEB), we know the implied message cannot be literal. But when we read a similar—but prophetic—message like: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (I Cor. 15:26), we reverse our standards and declare the message literal. The following words of Jesus on “life and death” are indeed illuminating:

In truth, in very truth I tell you, a time is coming, indeed it is already here, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear shall come to life. John 5:25 NEB

As Christ signifies, all those who hear the divine call, all those who do not close their hearts, shall come to life. Our true essence is spirit, not body. And God's Messengers come to bring us the gift of spiritual life:

...I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. John 10:10

Our parents channel the physical life to us; the Prophets, the spiritual. We lose the first, and retain the second. As the Scriptures teach:

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7

Verily, we are God's...And unto Him we do return.¹ Bahá'u'lláh

All men have proceeded from God and unto Him shall all return. All shall appear before Him for judgment. He is the Lord of the Day of Resurrection, of Regeneration and of Reckoning, and His revealed Word is the Balance.² The Báb

...and unto Us shall ye be brought back. Qur'án 21:36

That which can treasure the divine riches and blessings is the spirit, not the flesh:

...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God... I Corinthians 15:50

If our bodies cannot receive the Kingdom of God and His blessings, then what necessity is there for a body that has served its purpose and turned to dust to reshape itself? And what wisdom is there in the soul's return from its heavenly home, to this darksome world? Are God's many mansions in celestial realms (John 14:2) few or inadequate?

Double Standards Applied to the Meaning of Resurrection and Judgment

Let us cite further examples demonstrating the two standards of interpretation.

Resurrection. Resurrection is one of the chief and essential events associated with the advent of the Prince of Peace. Many scriptures—especially those of the Christians and the Muslims—declare that the dawn of the new day begins with the rising of the dead. Both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh teach that resurrection is spiritual, not physical. Basically it points to the rise or advent of a new Savior at the dawn of a new dispensation. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

...by “Resurrection” is meant the rise of the Manifestation of God to proclaim His Cause...³

The light of divine guidance rises each day from a new dawning-point, a new Redeemer, who shines from the earthly horizons for a designated period of time. This period, namely the duration of the ministry of a Messenger, is the day of resurrection. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

...the Day of Resurrection...is the Day of the rise of God Himself through His all-embracing Revelation.⁴

And in the words of the Báb:

...what is meant by the Day of Resurrection is this, that from the time of the appearance of Him Who is the Tree of divine Reality [the divine Redeemer], at whatever period and under whatever name, until the moment of His disappearance, is the Day of Resurrection.

For example, from the inception of the mission of Jesus—may peace be upon Him—till the day of His ascension was the Resurrection of Moses. For during that period the Revelation of God shone forth through the appearance of that divine Reality... And from the inception of the Revelation of the Apostle of God [Muhammad]—may the blessings of God be upon Him—till the day of His ascension was the Resurrection of Jesus—peace be upon Him...⁵

Now resurrection from death refers to the rise of the seekers from unbelief to belief, from the dark depths of despair and ignorance to the exalted heights of faith, knowledge, certitude, and enlightenment. The coming of the Light Bringers is like the coming of spring. By releasing spiritual powers, they stir the potentials and

raise the conscience of the believers. The following words are quite descriptive of their divine Mission:

Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you. Ephesians 5:14 NEB

A sapling, unaided by the bounties of the sun, remains dormant and lifeless. A soul unaided by the Sun of Righteousness cannot but linger and languish in the dark. It fails to attain its potential, to partake of “the spirit of faith” and the gift of “the eternal life” in store for it. Thus the divine Messenger rises in the firmament of faith, bestowing light and life to the dark and dormant souls of the seekers of His Kingdom. Without His bounties, they languish and decay like the dead, deprived of divine nourishment. The glorious rays from above uplift the denizens of the valley of death to the celestial horizons of certitude and enlightenment. In the words of the Báb:

True resurrection from the sepulchers means to be quickened in conformity with His Will, through the power of His utterance.

Paradise is attainment of His good-pleasure and everlasting hell-fire His judgment through justice.

The Day He revealeth Himself is Resurrection Day which shall last as long as He ordaineth.

Everything belongeth unto Him and is fashioned by Him. All besides Him are His creatures.⁶

Does such an interpretation seem far-fetched or unreasonable? Not really. In fact, the Gospel distinctly supports it. Here are the words of Christ disclosing the inner essence of resurrection:

Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and I am life. If a man has faith in me, even though he die, he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die. Do you believe this?’

John 11:25-26 NEB

In these memorable words Christ declares that He is resurrection, that is, He bestows a dynamic, spiritual power that causes the spiritually dead to rise. Those who are dormant, frozen, lifeless are stirred and inspired by the fire of His love. This is indeed the true resurrection, and this is why God sends His Messengers.

Judgment. Another word closely linked to “resurrection” is “judgment.” Some people believe that judgment can occur only when the dead are resurrected. Those interpreters would be right in their thinking if they could only modify their conception of “death,” if they could think of spiritual, rather than physical, death.

In a sense the time of the advent of every Messenger is the time of judging. Here are the words of the Qur’án:

Each community [every people] has a messenger, and when their messenger comes, judgment is given between them with justice.
Qur’án 10:48

During the advent of the Messengers people are appraised, weighed, and sifted in terms of their response to Him. At these times, they are called upon to make a new choice. The judgment, of course, is mutual. The people judge the Messenger; the Messenger judges the people. When the time of crucifixion drew near, Jesus said:

Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world* be cast out.
John 12:31

The death of Jesus was the turning point in judgment. The vote was cast by the people that He must be crucified, that He must be cast out of this world. The vote of condemnation as realized by crucifixion constituted people’s judgment on the ruler and the prince of this world.

It should be pointed out that although “the day of Judgment” may designate the dawning of any dispensation, it points specifically to the present dispensation, for ours is a critical day—it is the final day of fulfillment. The Psalmist speaks eloquently of our time:

Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult, let the sea roar and all the creatures in it, let the fields exult and all that is in them; then let all the trees of the forest shout for joy before the Lord when he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the earth with righteousness and the peoples in good faith. Psalms 96:11-13 NEB

The New Testament confirms the Old:

* Christ referred to Himself both in the first advent and the second as “the Prince of this world.” See John 16:11 and 14:30.

When he comes, he will confute the world, and show where wrong and right and judgment lie.

John 16:8 NEB

It was mentioned earlier that the time of the advent of God's Messengers is the time of testing. There is a close link between testing and judging. To be judged, one must inevitably be tested. Again we see harmony between the scriptural prophecies. For if resurrection was physical, there would be no need for testing. Under fear and a display of power, testing would become meaningless.

Other Examples of Double Standards

The application of double standards to the words of Jesus extends far beyond "resurrection," or "life and death." It covers the whole spectrum of the Scriptures. For instance, it is a common expectation that when Christ returns, everyone will see Him. Now when we read a verse referring to those who have eyes but cannot see (Jer. 5:21; Isa. 42:20; Mark 8:18), we know what is meant by "seeing" or "not seeing." We know "seeing" refers to insight, not eyesight. But when we read that at the coming of the Lord "every eye shall see him," we quickly shift from "insight" to "eyesight." (This subject requires further elaboration, and will be explained in detail soon.)

Similarly, when we read the words of Jesus saying "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:50 NIV), we know what He means by "heaven." We know He cannot mean literal heaven, for His body did not come from above. Yet when we encounter the word "heaven" in relation to the future, we suddenly adopt a new standard, always in harmony with our inner desire to behold the spectacular, the unearthly. (More about "heaven" later.)

To Summarize

Through the many examples provided, it becomes evident that the Scriptures often apply symbols to impossible or improbable events. The examples provided also indicate that we should apply only one standard of interpretation to the Scriptures. That is, we should refrain

from regarding the divine Words as symbolic when they refer to the past and literal when they point to the future.

Thus, the key to the unlocking of the symbols can often be found in the Scripture itself. The master key is an attitude free from preconceived notions— notions that have been ingrained and reinforced for countless generations, and accepted, without questioning.

Part VI

Two Major Misconceptions

The revelation or unfoldment of truth may be likened to a healthy seed growing first into the tree, then the flower, and finally the fruit. It is the same seed that evolves through these stages, and it is the same truth that manifests itself progressively through the repeated rising of many great Faiths. The appearance of the fruit is the evidence and fulfillment of the potentialities that were inherent in the seed.

19

Belief in Exclusive Salvation

The Oneness of Divine Spirit

A common misconception prevalent among the followers of many religions is that their religion is a perfect one, never to be altered. Many of the Jews living in the time of Jesus felt that the laws of Moses were perfect, and that no one was worthy of changing them. And there were others among them who believed that their Faith was merely in need of minor reforms, but not rebirth or total renewal. Judaism as revealed could be adapted to meet the needs of their age. Therefore, they concluded, “why should there be a new Faith with new laws and teachings?”

But these objectors were baffled, disappointed, and perhaps powerless to hear the following analogies or arguments offered by Christ in response to their fallacious thoughts and theories:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on to an old coat; for then the patch tears away from the coat, and leaves a bigger hole. Neither do you put new wine into old wine-skins; if you do, the skins burst, and then the wine runs out and the skins are spoilt.

No, you put new wine into fresh skins; then both are preserved.

Matthew 9:16-17 NEB

Likewise many Christians believe that salvation can come only through Jesus. And it is a common belief among the Muslims that

Muhammad was the last and the greatest of the Messengers and that His Faith, as revealed, was a perfect one, never to be altered.

The answer to this simple but seemingly perplexing question may be found in many of the Holy Scriptures. Here is a simple explanation according to the Bahá'í scriptures. The Messengers are spiritual Light Bringers carrying and reflecting God's light to the world. Although outwardly they appear diverse or different, in essence they reflect one divine entity, one evolving truth. They are like identical mirrors held within various frames. (By frame is meant the physical conditions surrounding them; by mirror, the very essence of their being.) The divine reflections and perfections emanate from every Messenger. The diverse conditions of the frames in no way affect the quality of the light received by and reflected from the mirrors.

In *The Book of Certitude* Bahá'u'lláh uses many illustrations or analogies to convey the fundamental message of oneness. In one instance, He compares the heavenly Messengers to the sun, in another to the days of the year. The sun shines with greater intensity in summer, yet it does not change its identity as the earthly seasons change. As the time of the day advances and as the weather alters, so does our perception of the sun—but only our perception. Various cultures see the sun in different “lights,” and they call it by many names, yet these conditions do not alter or affect the identity or the oneness of the sun. The same holds true with the days. Each day has a particular name and appears in a particular position, yet it is a unit of time identical with every other day, governed by the same universal law and the same unique order. Let us review Bahá'u'lláh's own words:

Consider the sun. Were it to say now, “I am the sun of yesterday,” it would speak the truth. And should it, bearing the sequence of time in mind, claim to be other than that sun, it still would speak the truth. In like manner, if it be said that all the days are but one and the same, it is correct and true. And if it be said, with respect to their particular names and designations, that they differ, that again is true. For though they are the same, yet one doth recognize in each a separate designation, a specific attribute, a particular character.¹

Bahá'u'lláh then concludes:

Conceive accordingly the distinction, variation, and unity characteristic of the various Manifestations of holiness, that thou mayest comprehend the allusions made by the Creator of all names and attributes to the mysteries of distinction and unity, and discover the answer to thy question as to why that everlasting Beauty should have, at sundry times, called Himself by different names and titles.²

(For further references, see *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 20-21, 142, 152-153, 160-163, 177.)

In the following passages, the Báb refers to the divine power, which returns again and again through many Messengers, Mediators, or Prophets. He calls that Power, who inspires the Messengers, “the First Remembrance,” or “the Primal Will (of God)”:

If, however, thou art sailing upon the sea of creation, know thou that the First Remembrance, which is the Primal Will of God, may be likened unto the sun. God hath created Him through the potency of His might, and He hath, from the beginning that hath no beginning, caused Him to be manifested in every Dispensation through the compelling power of His behest, and God will, to the end that knoweth no end, continue to manifest Him according to the good-pleasure of His invincible Purpose.

And know thou that He indeed resembleth the sun. Were the risings of the sun to continue till the end that hath no end, yet there hath not been nor ever will be more than one sun; and were its settings to endure for evermore, still there hath not been nor ever will be more than one sun. It is this Primal Will which appeareth resplendent in every Prophet and speaketh forth in every revealed Book. It knoweth no beginning, inasmuch as the First deriveth its firstness from It; and knoweth no end, for the Last oweth its lastness unto It.

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 Muhammad, 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.³

The divine Manifestations have all declared their spiritual oneness, yet the followers have failed to recognize the common purpose, the common spirit, the divine light; they have worshipped and adored the diverse names that identify the spirit. Here are the words of Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh all testifying to their common origin, their oneness of spirit:

I am not the first Buddha Who came upon this earth, nor shall I be the last. In due time another Buddha will arise in the world... He will reveal to you the same eternal truths which I have taught you.⁴ Buddha

Whenever there is decay of righteousness, O Bharata, and there is exaltation of unrighteousness, then I Myself come forth; for the protection of the good, for the destruction of evildoers, for the sake of firmly establishing righteousness, I am born from age to age.⁵ Krishna

I am all the Prophets.⁶ I am the first Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus.⁷ Our Cause is but one.⁸ Muhammad

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.⁹ Christ (See also Revelation 1:8; 1:17; 2:8; 21:6)

He Who is both the Beginning and the End, He Who is both Stillness and Motion, is now manifest before your eyes. Behold how, in this Day, the Beginning is reflected in the End, how out of Stillness Motion hath been engendered. This motion hath been generated by the potent energies which the words of the Almighty have released throughout the entire creation. Whoso hath been quickened by its vitalizing power, will find himself impelled to attain the court of the Beloved; and whoso hath deprived himself therefrom, will sink into irretrievable despondency.¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh

Another evidence supporting the spirit of oneness among God's many Messengers may be found in the words of Christ about His

own return. For He used the pronouns “I” and “He” synonymously. Sometimes He identified the promised Redeemer as “I” (Rev. 22:12) or “the Son of Man” (Matt. 16:27), at other times as “another Comforter” (John 14:16) or “the Lord” (Luke 13:35), or “the Prince of this world” (John 14:30). In one instance (John 14:16-30), Jesus changed the pronouns, during the same conversation, four times: from third person to first person, then from first to third, from third to first, and again from first to third. Here are the specific passages from chapter fourteen of John:

- I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, the Spirit of truth, to be with you forever. The world cannot accept this counselor, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you* (verses 16-17 NIV).
- I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you (verse 18 NIV).
- But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (verse 26 NIV).
- I am going away and I am coming back to you (verse 28 NIV).
- I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming (verse 30 NIV).

Still another evidence may be found in the return of Elijah as John the Baptist. As mentioned, the Jews expected the return of the Prophet Elijah (whom they believed had not died), before the advent of their Savior. So they wondered how Jesus could be a God-sent Savior, when there was as yet no trace of Elijah. And they were surprised to hear Jesus say that John the Baptist (a new creation born as an infant and with a new name) was indeed Elijah, who according to the Jews had disappeared as a mature man and was expected to reappear in the same form. Here are once again the words of Jesus:

* By saying “another Counselor” Jesus is implying that He too was a Counselor, and that the other Counselor will be like Him.

And if you are willing to accept it, he [John the Baptist] is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.

Matthew 11:14-15 NIV

By these words Jesus meant simply that Elijah and John the Baptist shared and reflected the same spiritual attributes, otherwise, how could one be the return of the other?

As Jesus stated, understanding why John could count as Elijah required “ears,” namely receptive ears—a divine gift required for every seeker of truth wishing to know the truth.

The Divine Realm Not Bound by Time

The divine realm is not divided by time; past, present, and future are one. What came in the name of Jesus had already appeared many times. To emphasize the spirit of oneness and timelessness, Christ said:

Before Abraham was, I am.

John 8:58

It is evident that Jesus of Nazareth did not precede His forefather Abraham. What preceded Abraham was the Holy Spirit, the Primal Will, a reality eternal and timeless, an entity that precedes all the Messengers, and illuminated them all. Christ also said:

I am the root and offspring of David...

Revelation 22:16

If taken literally, the statement contradicts itself. For, aside from the transcendent realm of unity, Jesus could not be both the root and offspring of the same person. And it is obvious that He could not be the root to someone who preceded Him. Again the passage can point only to the spirit of oneness, which can accept no boundaries or limitations.

In relation to the advent of Bahá'u'lláh (often referred to as “Him Whom God shall make manifest”), the Báb wrote:

From the beginning that hath no beginning all men have bowed in adoration before Him Whom God shall make manifest and will continue to do so until the end that hath no end.¹¹

In other words, the divine power manifested in our age in Bahá'u'lláh, “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” has been in existence and adored eternally and will continue to exist and be adored for evermore, “until the end that hath no end.”

In the following passage, the Báb says He was a believer in Bahá'u'lláh even before the creation:

...the Point of the Bayán Himself [the Báb] hath believed in Him Whom God shall make manifest [Bahá'u'lláh], before all things were created.¹²

He also indicates that He is one with Bahá'u'lláh:

...indeed He is I and I am He.¹³

The Misconception of Finality Among the Muslims

The misconception concerning the uniqueness of one's Redeemer has afflicted the followers of many faiths. Among them are the Muslims, who regard Muhammad as the last of God's many Messengers, with no One ever to succeed Him. This belief stems primarily from the words of Muhammad calling Himself “the seal of Prophets.” Since a seal, like a signature, is usually placed at the bottom of a letter, the Muslims have concluded that what the word “seal” signifies is the ending of the Book, the closing of divine revelation to the world. To eradicate this unfounded belief, Bahá'u'lláh offers many explanations. This is one relating to our present theme:

Hath not Muhammad, Himself, declared: “I am all the Prophets?” Hath He not said as We have already mentioned: “I am Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus?” Why should Muhammad, that immortal Beauty, Who hath said: “I am the first Adam” be incapable of saying also: “I am the last Adam”? For even as He regarded Himself to be the “First of the Prophets”—that is Adam—in like manner, the “Seal of the Prophets” is also applicable unto that Divine Beauty. It is admittedly obvious that being the “First of the Prophets,” He likewise is their “Seal.”¹⁴

A most fascinating aspect of religious beliefs is that the believers establish a framework of belief quite consistent. The framework contains many dogmas and misjudgments accumulated over centuries by the believers who wish to see the superiority of their own faith and their own beliefs over those of the others. To establish and maintain the consistency, the religious leaders repeat, emphasize, and exaggerate the precepts or teachings that fit into the established framework, and deemphasize or ignore the precepts or teachings that fail to fit into the framework. The religious leaders of Islám have emphasized the phrase “the seal of Prophets,” which in no way proves the finality of divine revelation, yet they have ignored the clear and categorical words of the Qur’án proving beyond any doubt that the divine revelation is continuous, and that there will be other Apostles or Messengers after Muhammad. Here is a verse from the Qur’án pointing to the coming of other Messengers after Muhammad:

O children of Adam! there shall come to you Apostles* [Messengers] from among yourselves, rehearsing my signs to you; and whoso shall fear God and do good works, no fear shall be upon them, neither shall they be put to grief. Qur’án 7:33

Even if Muhammad had specifically stated that He was the last Messenger, the statement would not point to the closing of divine revelation. For in the divine realm there is no such thing as “first” or “last.” All the Messengers (no matter when they appeared, or will appear) are both “the first” and “the last.” As we already noted, Christ made the claim to finality even before Muhammad:

I am...the last. Revelation 22:13

If taken literally, the above passage leaves no room for the coming of Muhammad.

What raises a divine Manifestation to His exalted station is the divine Illumination, the Holy Spirit. All the Messengers receive this power, and reflect it according to our receptivity and capacity.

* Muhammad calls Himself as well as other great Messengers “rasúl,” a word commonly translated into English as “Apostle.” Therefore “the coming of Apostles” points to the coming of other Messengers like Muhammad Himself.

In this sense, they are all one and the same, for they all manifest the same spirit of truth.

Belief in Exclusive Salvation Among the Christians

Belief in Muhammad's finality among the Muslims has its counterpart among the Christians. For many Christians believe that a soul can be saved from eternal death and damnation only by accepting Jesus as the only Savior. This belief has originated from a few verses, especially the following recorded in John:

Jesus answered, "I am the way—and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6 NIV

Let us now examine this passage in several ways. First, what tense did Jesus use? Did He use only the present tense, or past and future tenses as well? Did He say no one ever came to the Father except through me? Did He also say no one will ever come to the Father except through me? The answer is evident. Jesus spoke only in the present tense, referring to His own dispensation, which covered the period between His advent and the advent of the next Redeemer. There is nothing unusual or unique about making such a statement. For God wishes us to follow His latest Message revealed by His latest Messenger. If we reject His new Message, He does not consider us worthy of His presence. So He warns us at the beginning of every dispensation that if we reject His new Messenger, we have indeed rejected Him who sends the Messenger, and therefore we cannot be entitled to the reward of recognition, which is nearness to God.

Muhammad conveyed a similar meaning when He said that "Verily religion before God is Islám." The Muslims interpret this statement by saying that Islám is the only religion that will ever be acceptable before God.

Second, Christ Himself prophesied the coming of another Redeemer, with a new name* (the Spirit of truth, the Counselor, the Comforter), who will bring greater measures of truth than He Himself brought during the Christian Dispensation. If people were not to be saved by the next Redeemer, what would be the necessity of sending Him?

Let us look at this question from still another angle. For our Creator asks us to use our reasoning powers. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord...” (Isa. 1:18). Let us examine the doctrine of “exclusive salvation” by looking at those who lived before Jesus. Is not the purpose of every Savior, every Prophet, to bring people to God? If a Messenger is incapable of doing this, then what is the purpose of sending Him? Why did Noah and Abraham and Moses and all the other great Messengers come? Did they suffer for no purpose?

Both the Old Testament and the New teach virtues and declare commandments that are identical. Then why should the people who obeyed those commandments during Mosaic dispensation remain deprived of eternal life, and yet those born later, obeying the same laws, receive it? Is this in harmony with divine justice, or even with human justice? Did people not suffer, did they not make sacrifices for the same God during the time of Abraham, Noah, and Moses as they did during the time of Jesus?

Belief in “exclusive salvation” stands contrary not only to the ways of reason but to the words of the Scriptures as well. For we know both by reason and revelation that: “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). Then How can He, the impartial Father called love (John 3:16; I John 4:8), ignore His children, leave them comfortless, keep them deprived, up to a certain point in history, and then—and not before—decide to save them, to redeem them, to offer them the gift of eternal life? Can such an unjustified partiality, such a gross injustice, be expected from the All-Knowing—the God of Grace, Compassion, Love, and Mercy? Can we accept or tolerate such a treatment even from our own fallible parents?

* For details, see Volume II (*Lord of Lords*).

To say that Jesus was the first to bring salvation to the world leads to still other conclusions or consequences. One such consequence is that even the great Messengers who preceded Christianity were not, and could not be, saved until the advent of Jesus. How could Noah, or Abraham, or Moses who came to guide the people be deprived of divine Guidance and Salvation? Are we not told that Moses and Jesus were alike?

I [God] will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses], one of their own race, and I will put my words into his mouth.

Deuteronomy 18:18-19 NEB

For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people...’ Acts 3:22 NIV

See also Deuteronomy 18:15-19

Was not Moses glorified and exalted?

...thou [Moses] shall be to him [Aaron] instead of God.

Exodus 4:16

See also Exodus 7:1

Further, the Israelites are called repeatedly God’s chosen people:

You are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you out of all peoples on earth to be his special possession.

Deuteronomy 14:2 NEB

See also Deuteronomy 7:6

How could God deprive His chosen and holy people of the gift of salvation, and yet bestow that gift on others?

As stated, in every age the divine Voice calls the seekers of truth to the divine Way. Here are the words of the Báb proclaiming what Christ had proclaimed earlier:

This is the Way of God for all the inhabitants of earth and heaven and all that lieth betwixt them. No God is there but Me, the Almighty, the Inaccessible, the Most Exalted.¹⁵

Since there is only one God, ultimately all ways must lead to one Way. As the words of the Báb indicate, the Way of God is One for all His children, wherever they may be. The Báb also says:

No God is there but Me, the Almighty, the Inaccessible, the Most Exalted.¹⁶

Who is the “Me”? Is it the Báb Himself? Or is it the divine Voice speaking through Him? The same Voice that spoke through Christ declaring:

I am...the first and the last.

Revelation 22:13

Jesus, the Only Son of God

Those who wish to emphasize the idea of exclusive salvation have tried to find other evidences for their beliefs. One evidence they have found and used is that “Jesus was the only begotten Son of God.” The relationship is quite clear. One cannot be saved except through Jesus. Why? Because God begot only one Son and that Son was His only Way. If God had wished to have other Ways and other Saviors, He would “father” more than one Son.

Again the Bahá’í teachings indicate that we should not take the words Son and Father literally. As the Bible repeatedly attests, we can all be children of God:

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

John 1:12-13 NIV

Yet in each dispensation God singles out only One among His many children to become the Mediator between Him and His other children. In the Christian dispensation Christ received such an exalted mission. He was raised to the station of Sonship, to prepare the way for the kingdom of His Father. He came in the glory of the Son but prophesied that He would return in the glory of the Father.*

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory...

Matthew 16:27 NIV

See also Mark 8:38

* “Father-Son” implies an intimate relationship. It also points to a growing humanity that can absorb, in each succeeding age, greater measures of truth. See the parable of the vineyard, Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16.

Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly claimed to be that same Spirit referred to by Jesus, to have come in the glory of the Father:

He Who is the Father is come, and the Son (Jesus), 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: '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.'¹⁷

Aside from this divine Power, which they all manifest, the Messengers do differ, each with a unique identity. Bahá'u'lláh clarifies this point:

We have already in the foregoing pages assigned two stations unto each of the Luminaries arising from the Daysprings of eternal holiness. One of these stations, the station of essential unity, We have already explained. "No distinction do We make between any of them." The other is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfills a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.¹⁸

To Summarize

- Every Redeemer is the Redeemer for His own dispensation, and no one can save during that period but Him.
- In the divine realm, words such as "I," "Me," or "Him" do not have the same meaning as they do in the human realm. For the divine realm is the Kingdom of Oneness—not polarity—and all the references, all the pronouns, refer to the same Source.
- The illusions of finality or superiority of one Redeemer or Messenger over the others has obscured the vision of many

believers. As Bahá'u'lláh testifies, it has served as a crucible in which the hearts of the seekers have been tested.

- It is time we recognize the oneness of divine purpose and divine spirit, and to acknowledge a truth taught by all the Messengers: that there is but one Way to God, and that is God's Way—a Way paved and continually expanded and enlightened by one holy and divine Spirit, manifested again and again in many human temples in many names and appearances, with nothing in this process of rebirth and renewal ever diminished or lost:

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. John 6:39

We should seek to adore the unchanging light, not the changing lamp, to worship the Spirit, not the temple. For the Spirit dawns through many names and many temples. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Arise thou amongst men in the name of this all-compelling Cause, and summon, then, the nations unto God, the Exalted, the Great. Be thou not of them who called upon God by one of His names, but who, when He Who is the Object of all names appeared, denied Him and turned aside from Him, and, in the end, pronounced sentence against Him with manifest injustice.¹⁹

20

The Role of Religious Leaders

Many Depend on Religious Leaders

Notwithstanding the divinely-inspired admonitions of all the Prophets, the Saints, and Chosen ones of God, enjoining the people to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears, they have disdainfully rejected their counsels and have blindly followed, and will continue to follow, the leaders of their Faith.¹
Bahá'u'lláh

Following the preceding words, Bahá'u'lláh states that when people (those awed by the sheer weight of numbers) hear about the dawn of the new Revelation, they show great surprise. And then they reply:

“What! Meanest thou that all these divines, all these exponents of learning, with all their authority, their pomp and pageantry, have erred, and failed to distinguish truth from falsehood? Dost thou, and people like thyself, pretend to have comprehended that which they have not understood?”²

And then Bahá'u'lláh offers His reply:

If numbers and excellence of apparel be regarded as the criterions of learning and truth, the peoples of a bygone age, whom those of today have never surpassed in numbers, magnificence and power, should certainly be accounted a superior and worthier people.³

It is as much true today as it was in the time of Bahá'u'lláh—indeed throughout all the ages—that the masses find security and strength in numbers, and they find many ways to justify their dependency. Here is a most popular way: “When we have special problems, we seek specialists. Do we not have specialists in religion? Do we not have biblical scholars and theologians to lead us to truth? It is obvious that religious matters should be handled by those who know best. This is elementary logic. Isn't it?”

Such reasoning sounds convincing, indeed, but convincing only until it is put to the test; then, it fails flagrantly. It fails the test of history, it fails the test of reason, and it fails the test of the Scriptures. Let us begin with the test of reason.

Reason Stands Against Dependency

What is it that makes a person deserving of the presence of the Lord? Is it the purity of heart, or scholastic achievement? Is it character, or proficiency in Greek and Hebrew? Is it devotion and dedication to truth, or leadership, power, and prestige? We are told “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8), but never “Blessed are the theologians for they are the first to adore the truth.” In fact we are told just the opposite (Matt. 20:16). And who deserve to stand deprived? Those who lack knowledge, or those who lack courage? What does Jesus say we should be like to enter the kingdom of heaven? Does He say we should be like scholars, or like little children?

“Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” And he put his arms round them, laid his hands upon them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:14-16 NEB

What is it that children have? Curiosity, openness, humility, and innocence. And what is it that they don't have? Preconceived notions. No wonder Jesus said:

...I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven, and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Matthew 11:25 NIV

The more childlike, the more our Creator admires and adores us. A little child is perfect, exactly as God made him—pure, radiant, undefiled, unspoiled. He learns everything else later.

History Stands Against Dependency

Let us now put “the elementary logic” to the test of history. Who were the first to be alarmed by the advent of Christ? Who led the people to deny Him, to denounce Him, and at last to crucify Him (John 19:6)? Were they not the religious leaders? Were not those who had distinguished themselves in their knowledge of the Scripture and the law condemned by Christ? Condemned not only for denying the divine truth but for discouraging others from listening to their Savior.

Woe to you experts in the law [Mosaic Law], because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.

Luke 11:52 NIV

The greatest of the Jewish scholars and their foremost authority Annas failed to recognize Christ, yet a fisherman like Peter and a peasant like Mary Magdalene became devoted and distinguished disciples. Caiaphas, the greatest Jewish judge, “declared that it would be better for Jesus to die than that the nation be destroyed.”⁴ Was proficiency in Aramaic or Hebrew and Greek of any help to Annas and Caiaphas? Did their repeated readings and interpretations of the Scriptures before vast congregations lead them to their Savior? Was their profound knowledge of history, language, and prophecy, of any help to them? What did Mary Magdalene, a simple peasant, find in Jesus to convince her of His divine mission, of His incomparable glory? And what did she have to make her deserving of the rewards of recognition? Was it sincerity and humility, or was it theology? Addressing the religious leaders of His day, Jesus said:

...I tell you this: tax-gatherers and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For when John came to show you the right way to live, you did not believe him, but the tax-gatherers and prostitutes did; and even when you had seen that, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Matthew 21:31-32 NEB

The relationship between the religious leaders and their followers has been strange, indeed. People have waited for their leaders to lead them, yet the leaders have never taken the initiative; they have always waited for their followers to make the first move, and have followed when they had no other choice.

Scriptures Stand Against Dependency

Let us now put “the elementary logic” to the third test, that of the Scriptures. First, never do we find in the words of Christ any intimation that the believers should put their spiritual trust into the hands of religious leaders. On the contrary, we find that the Scriptures advocate independence of judgment, and remind the believers of their own accountability before God:

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Romans 14:12

In other words, if someone fails to find the truth by putting his trust in others, including his priest, pastor, rabbi, or mullá, believing and hoping that they will lead him, he will find his excuse for failure unacceptable before God. Here are once again Bahá’u’lláh’s words quoted earlier:

If, in the Day when all the peoples of the earth will be gathered together, any man should, whilst standing in the presence of God, be asked: “Wherefore hast thou disbelieved in My Beauty and turned away from My Self,” and if such a man should reply and say: “Inasmuch as all men have erred, and none hath been found willing to turn his face to the Truth, I, too, following their example, have grievously failed to recognize the Beauty of the

Eternal,” such a plea will, assuredly, be rejected. For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself.⁵

And here are the words of the Qur’án confirming Bahá’u’lláh’s words:

On the day when their faces shall be rolled in the fire, they shall cry: “Oh! would that we had obeyed God, and obeyed the Apostle!” And they shall say: “Oh our Lord! indeed we obeyed our chiefs and our great ones, and they misled us from the way of God—O our Lord! give them a double chastisement, and curse them with a heavy curse.” Qur’án 33:66-68

And second, not only does the Bible point to individual responsibility and freedom of choice, it also predicts that those who rank first among the people shall rank last. Consequently, those who follow the first are likely to find themselves in the last position. Here the words of the Scriptures:

Thus will the last be first, and the first last.* Matthew 20:16 NEB

The Muslim scriptures support the biblical scriptures:

He that is exalted among you shall be abased, and he that is abased shall be exalted.⁶✦

These words should not surprise us. For God loves the most those who are the humblest, and the humblest do not rank highly among the people; they rank highly before God.

The Religious Leaders Hold the Key

The religious leaders occupy an exalted position. Bahá’u’lláh refers to them as “the stars of the heaven of My knowledge.”⁷ And He asks that they be respected:

Respect ye the divines and learned amongst you, they whose conduct accords with their professions, who transgress not the

* See the entire parable, Matthew 20:1-16.

✦ See also I Corinthians 1:18-25.

bounds which God hath fixed, whose judgments are in conformity with His behests as revealed in His Book. Know ye that they are the lamps of guidance unto them that are in the heavens and on the earth. They who disregard and neglect the divines and learned that live amongst them—these have truly changed the favor with which God hath favored them.⁸

But along with the respect and position goes the responsibility (Luke 12:47-48). If they do not take their responsibility seriously, they fall from their lofty position, from the first to the last, and if they cause others to stumble, they face divine retribution (Matt. 18:1-7; Mark 9:42; 12:38-40). Bahá'u'lláh writes:

O concourse of bishops! Ye are the stars of the heaven of My knowledge. My mercy desireth not that ye should fall upon the earth. My justice, however, declareth: “This is that which the Son (Jesus) hath decreed.” And whatsoever hath proceeded out of His blameless, His truth-speaking, trustworthy mouth, can never be altered.⁹

By the words: “This is that which the Son hath decreed,” Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the words of Jesus (the Son) to His disciples that at the time of His return:

...the stars* shall fall from heaven... Matthew 24:29

The role of religious leaders is vital, because they hold the key; they have always held the key.* They can make the difference between a peaceful world ruled by Justice, and a world dominated by division, war, and self-interest. They have the awesome responsibility to awaken the masses, yet they repose contentedly unaware of the consequences of neglect. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

If the learned and worldly-wise men of this age were to allow mankind to inhale the fragrance of fellowship and love, every understanding heart would apprehend the meaning of true

* The symbolism of “the star,” “the sun,” and “the moon” have already been examined.

* Since the latter part of the 19th century, their influence has been steadily declining.

liberty, and discover the secret of undisturbed peace and absolute composure. Were the earth to attain this station and be illumined with its light it could then be truly said of it: “Thou shall see in it no hollows or rising hills.”¹⁰

To Summarize

- Recognition of God’s Messengers does not require proficiency in theology. What it requires is virtues, the attributes that harmonize the human will with the divine:

Whoever has the will to do the will of God shall know whether my teaching comes from him or is merely my own. John 7:17-

- If you are in a position of spiritual leadership, and if you are seeking to examine the claim of Bahá’u’lláh with an open mind, that is, if you are not trying to prove the new Message wrong, but rather find the truth, whatever it may be, then you are worthy of every praise, for you are abiding by the Will of the Creator. But if you find yourself impelled to reject the new Message before you have fully examined it, you can in no way discern the truth.

Lay not aside the fear of God, O ye the learned of the world, and judge fairly the Cause of this unlettered One to Whom all the Books of God, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting, have testified... Will not the dread of Divine displeasure, the fear of Him Who hath no peer or equal, arouse you?... Open your eyes, and, beholding His plight, meditate diligently upon that which your hands have wrought, that haply ye may not be deprived of the light of His Divine utterance, nor remain bereft of your share of the ocean of His knowledge.¹¹

Bahá’u’lláh

Say, O concourse of divines! Be fair in your judgment, I adjure you by God. Produce then whatever proofs and testimonies ye possess, if ye are to be reckoned among the inmates of this glorious habitation. Set your hearts towards the Dayspring of divine Revelation that We may disclose before your eyes the equivalent of all such verses, proofs,

testimonies, affirmations and evidences as ye and other kindreds of the earth possess. Fear ye God and be not of them that well deserve the chastisement of God, the Lord of creation.¹² Bahá'u'lláh

Part VII

Summary and Conclusion

Sanctify your souls, O ye people of the world, that
haply ye may attain that station which God hath
destined for you.

Bahá'u'lláh

21

Every Eye Shall See Him

Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him...

Revelation 1:7

As Bahá'u'lláh unveils the divine mysteries in His *Book of Certitude*, He constantly calls upon the seekers of truth to ponder, to reflect, and to examine their motives. For unless and until the seeker sanctifies his soul from all else save God, and ardently aspires to know the mysteries and to be guided to the path of knowledge, in no way can he discern the divine glory:

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.¹

Since the glory of God is sanctified from earthly glory, only the inner—not the outer—eye is capable of discerning it. No wonder the heavenly Voice refers again and again to those who having eyes cannot see, and having ears cannot hear.

You may hear and hear, but you will never understand; you may look and look, but you will never see. Acts 28:26 NEB

For, we may ask, what is that which hears? The ear (the instrument), or the hearer himself (the inner ear)? And what is that which sees? The eye (the instrument), or the inner eye (the insight)? And what is that which can see the glory of God? The eye or the vision? And who deserves to be deprived of seeing such an exalted and glorious vision? The blind in body, or the blind in spirit? Would the divine

Wisdom allow the blind in spirit to see the glory of God, but deprive the physically blind? Would it not be more reasonable to acknowledge that “by every eye shall see him” is meant not the physical but the spiritual eye? For truth always hides itself from the strangers, from the unprepared and the undeserving—namely the blind in spirit (Matt. 15:14).

Those endowed with the eye of spirit discern, at the dawn of every dispensation, the divine glory as distinctly as the sun; others perceive nothing; they see the “Day of Resurrection” like any other day. In the words of the Báb:

Their hearts are deprived of the power of true insight, and thus they cannot see, while those endowed with the eyes of the spirit circle like moths round the Light of Truth until they are consumed. It is for this reason that the Day of Resurrection is said to be the greatest of all days, yet it is like unto any other day.²

The Test of Consistency

If we take the word “see” symbolically, it harmonizes not only with the spirit of the Scriptures but with its letter as well; but if we take it literally we encounter many contradictions and inconsistencies. As a means of summarizing all five standards by which the symbolic can be separated from the literal, let us put this sign (“every eye shall see him”) to the test. Let us see how many problems and contradictions we will have to face if we take the symbol of “seeing” literally.

- If Christ were to appear in the sky observed by every eye, then how could anyone dare to reject Him? (The prophecies indicate that He will once again face opposition.)
- If every eye were to see the Redeemer, then why would the people be told to watch? Because they would have no choice but to see the object of their search.
- If Christ were to be seen physically by every eye, then what would happen to man’s freedom of choice? For we know

freedom is one of God's greatest gifts to us. Would He take it away from us?

- A practical problem, not referred to previously: how is it possible for the Redeemer to be literally seen over millions and millions of miles? "Let us reason together, saith the Lord" (Isa. 1:18).
- If Christ were to be seen by all eyes, it is obvious that no one could copy such a miraculous achievement; then, why would any one need to fear false saviors and prophets? How could anyone be deceived? (We are told to beware of deceivers, who make claims in the name of Christ.)
- If the advent were to be so spectacular, then why would the Scriptures offer so many means of testing a Messenger? Would the people be in need of proofs? (More about this in the next volume.)
- How did Christ interpret the prophecies that required supernatural powers on a mass scale, such as saving the Jews from servitude, or the heavenly descent of Elijah? Did He not say that He Himself came from heaven, though we know He was born on the earth?
- Did Jesus not use words such as "see" or "hear" often figuratively? Here is a unique example:

Jesus said, "It is for judgment that I have come into this world—to give sight to the sightless and to make blind those who see." Some Pharisees in his company asked, "Do you mean that we are blind?" "If you were blind," said Jesus, "you would not be guilty, but because you say 'We see,' your guilt remains."

John 9:39-41 NEB

The Pharisees were confused by the passage because they took it literally. The word "see" as used by Jesus in the preceding passage conveys two differing meanings: first, to see or to recognize the truth; and second, to be self-righteous or see only one's own narrow vision of the truth, blindly claiming to be in possession of true knowledge. If taken literally, the passage conveys confusing and contradictory meanings.

In the Scriptures we can find many other examples demonstrating the figurative use of our senses, such as “eye” or “ear.” These are a few examples:

Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Isaiah 43:8

I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. Job 29:15

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee... Matthew 5:29

...the eye of the lofty shall be humbled. Isaiah 5:15

(See also Matt. 15:14; 11:14; John 14:19; Isa. 29:10.)

- If the advent were to be heavenly and dramatic, what would happen to the prophecies indicating that the divine Kingdom will grow gradually like a seed?
- Why would the people need to be told to prepare themselves spiritually, in order to recognize the Redeemer?
- If the meaning of prophetic words were clear to the people, and if they were qualified to interpret them, then why would they be told to postpone judgment until the Lord comes, until they hear His interpretation? Why would they be told that the prophecies “are of no private interpretation”?
- If the Redeemer were to be seen by all, then how could He be able to come like a thief in the night?
- If we had no handicap (shortsightedness) in seeing the glory of God, why would we be asked so often “to overcome”?

Thus we can see clearly that if we take the word “see” symbolically all the signs and prophecies fit with perfect precision; otherwise we have to contradict not only the rules of reason but the explicit words of the Scriptures as well. Paul said “put everything to the test.” What test? The test of reason: “Let us reason together, saith the Lord.”

The Rewards of Seeing

Those who overcome their spiritual handicaps are promised to receive every reward imaginable. Christ makes this promise eight times in the Book of Revelation:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Revelation 2:7 NIV

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Revelation 2:11 NIV

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

Revelation 2:17 NIV

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:5-6 NIV

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:12-13 NIV

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:21-22 NIV

As Christ declares, not only the vile but the cowardly as well (those who are afraid to look and to see) must face spiritual death; and they must face it twice, once in this life and then again in the next. One death leads to the other. Lack of courage to see and to explore, excessive fear of falsehood—these stand as the first obstacle in the path of many seekers. They often appear innocent and they are readily justified, yet they can lead to every evil imaginable.

People are so afraid of hell, yet so negligent in heeding the divine counsels, negligent in following that which leads them away from

the fire to the light. Their fear of falsehood exceeds and overcomes their fear of hell. This seems puzzling and strange indeed.

Here is another passage from the Book of Revelation, rich and timely; rich because it contains many symbols including “the sense of seeing;” timely because it is directed to us, the people of this age. It is so descriptive of our time, so complete, so frank, so awakening, it should be made in pure gold and placed on every wall. When God speaks to man He does not need to apologize, and He cannot and will not appease or compromise in what needs to be said. Here are the words of Jesus spoken through His beloved disciple John the Revelator:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:15-22 NIV

Daniel prophesied saying “only the wise shall understand.” Who are the wise? They are those who use all their God-given powers, not some of them. For human powers are basically of two kinds: rational and emotional. If left unchecked and untamed, each of the two sets of powers can subdue the other. Only at peace and in balance can they conquer the truth. Rational powers can succeed only if illuminated by the light of justice; otherwise if tampered with or subdued by self, they lose their sight, stumbling into all

sorts of obstacles, into the many pitfalls that await the sightless. Every evil in the world results from this, that the mind is kept in the dark by the self. This is why Bahá'u'lláh refers again and again to a pure heart as the essential channel for knowing the truth, and for entering the heavenly home:

O SON OF SPIRIT!

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.³

Similarly the Báb adores and exalts purity to unimagined heights:

Know thou that in the Bayán [one of the Báb's chief works] purification is regarded as the most acceptable means for attaining nearness unto God and as the most meritorious of all deeds. Thus purge thou thine ear that thou mayest hear no mention besides God, and purge thine eye that it behold naught except God, and thy conscience that it perceive naught other than God, and thy tongue that it proclaim nothing but God, and thy hand to write naught but the words of God, and thy knowledge that it comprehend naught except God, and thy heart that it entertain no wish save God, and in like manner purge all thine acts and thy pursuits that thou mayest be nurtured in the paradise of pure love, and perchance mayest attain the presence of Him Whom God shall make manifest [Bahá'u'lláh], adorned with a purity which He highly cherisheth...⁴

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8

No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth. Sanctify your souls, O ye peoples of the world, that haply ye may attain that station which God hath destined for you...⁵

Bahá'u'lláh

...The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they cannot believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell

among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. Luke 8:11-15 NIV

If, in the Day when all the peoples of the earth will be gathered together, any man should, whilst standing in the presence of God, be asked: "Wherefore hast thou disbelieved in My Beauty and turned away from My Self," and if such a man should reply and say: "Inasmuch as all men have erred, and none hath been found willing to turn his face to the Truth, I, too, following their example, have grievously failed to recognize the Beauty of the Eternal," such a plea will, assuredly, be rejected. For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself.⁶

Bahá'u'lláh



Each of the six volumes on the proofs of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation serves a unique and essential purpose. If we consider the divine Revelation as a gem, then Volumes I, II, and III were the source of information about when, where, and how to look for the gem. This volume was an attempt to explain the prevailing misconceptions that obscure the seeker's visions, the false assumptions that prevent people from even looking or searching. The fifth and the last volume is the experience of looking at the gem itself, to see if it is indeed divine—flawless, peerless, pure, radiant. The next volume constitutes the final fruit of our search. For what ultimately matters is the quality of the gem, and not where or how to find it.

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