

The Baha'i Tradition

The Return of Joseph and the Peaceable Imagination

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In the Baha'i tradition, nonviolence is not a principle derived primarily through exegesis but one given through revelation, to use the Baha'i technical term for its primary scripture. There can be no dispute or discussion on this point by either a follower of the Baha'i faith or those who study and understand this relatively recent religion. What may be a source of discussion is the question of how in the context of the history of religion and religions and especially the history of the Baha'i faith this came to be. Here I will first offer a brief discussion of the role and status of violence in the Baha'i tradition, based on a comparatively limited selection of the most influential and characteristic statements from the vast library of Baha'i writings. The chapter will then examine some possible religious, historical, and social conditions in which these doctrines were articulated.

Baha'i teachings are unambiguous: the purpose of religion is the promotion of harmony and unity among human beings.¹ The founder of the Baha'i faith, Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–92), who is most widely known as *Baha'u'llah* (the glory of God), has written that if religion becomes the cause of disharmony then it is better that there be no religion at all.² Baha'i teachings condemn violence as something to be avoided at all costs. The Baha'i tradition is perhaps too young to have generated much in the way of exegesis as normally understood. However, exegesis is relevant in the sense that Baha'i writings may be thought of, in some ways, as an interpretation of Islamic scripture. (Here scripture would include both the Qur'an and the Hadith corpus.) Baha'u'llah was of course a son of Shi'i Islamic culture. A careful reading of the authoritative literature of the Baha'i faith leaves little doubt that its adherents are proud to acknowledge their tradition's Shi'i roots.³

The "grammar and syntax" of the piety and religious practice of both traditions

have much in common. However, with regard to specific points of doctrine there are dramatic and unbridgeable differences. In some instances, these differences have been made clear through a distinctive literary “event” I have elsewhere called “interpretation as revelation.”⁴ It is clear that one of the two most important works of Baha’u’llah, the *Kitāb-i Iqān*, is primarily a work of exegesis.⁵ It was written to explain how the messianic claims of Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–50), better known as the Bāb (Arabic for “gate” or “door”),⁶ may be understood in the light of certain qur’anic verses and Hadith or *Akhbār*, holy traditions or statements traced to the Prophet or, in this case, one of the other thirteen pure ones (Persian: *chehardeh ma’sūmāt*),⁷ namely the Prophet’s daughter Fatima, his son-in-law ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the remaining eleven Imams acknowledged by Ithna ‘ashariyya or Twelver Shi’ism.⁸ Composed around 1862, the book is relatively early in the corpus of Baha’u’llah’s writings.⁹ In this early major work the problem of violence is mentioned chiefly with regard to the violent response of humankind to all the prophets and messengers of God, including the Bab. In several passages, the author suggests that all previous prophets were considered by their immediate audiences, or at least a segment of them and sometimes overwhelming majority, to be seditious or heretical. Such concerns are particularly poignant in the case of Shi’ism and its expectation of the last day, the Day of Resurrection, *yawm al-qiyāma*. Traditionally, this “Day” is viewed as the time when the heretofore hidden Imam would appear with his faithful companions to “fill the earth with justice as it is now filled with tyranny.”¹⁰ The hero of this event, the returned twelfth Imam, is known by numerous epithets, among which the most common and perhaps most emblematic of a certain robust theme of Shi’i eschatology is “the one who arises with the sword,” *al-qā’im bi al-sayf*.¹¹

Baha’u’llah argues in the *Book of Certitude* that this divinely guided hero had indeed arisen and that his message had indeed been proclaimed. But the vast majority of those who have been in the peculiarly Shi’i sacramental state of messianic expectation and hope (namely *intizār*) these eleven or so centuries (that is, the Shi’a themselves) had failed to recognize him because they misinterpreted all of those traditions and qur’anic verses they had traditionally studied, memorized, and commented on in the hope of preparing themselves for his glad advent (*zuhūr*).¹² Thus, the same violent response to all previous divinely sanctioned prophets and messengers had also greeted the Bab, culminating in his execution, in 1850, in Tabriz. Baha’u’llah writes:

Why is it that the advent of every true manifestation of God [*mazhar-i ilāhī*] has been accompanied by such strife and tumult, by such tyranny and upheaval? This notwithstanding the fact that all the prophets of God, whenever made manifest unto the people of the world, have invariably foretold the coming of yet another prophet after them, and have established such signs as would herald the advent of the future dispensation. To this the records of all sacred books bear witness. Why then is it

that despite the expectation of men in their quest of the manifestations of holiness, and in spite of the signs recorded in the sacred books, such acts of violence, of oppression and cruelty, should have been perpetrated in every age and cycle against all the prophets and chosen ones of God? Even as He has revealed: "As oft as an Apostle cometh unto you with that which your souls desire not, you swell with pride, accusing some of being impostors and slaying others. (Qur'an 2:87)." (*Book of Certitude*, 12–13/10)¹³

An arguable subtext is that such persecution is indeed the most compelling credential for the claims of such prophets. Though this is not an exclusively Shi'í attitude (the Qur'an itself is replete with examples of the persecuted chosen one),¹⁴ it is an orientation or theme taken to its most developed extent in Twelver Shi'ism. With regard to the specific expectation that the Qā'im would arise with an actual sword and defeat all of the enemies of God in an apocalyptic battle, the *Book of Certitude* suggests that such a sword is best understood as a metonymic allusion to the sovereignty (*saltānat*) of the Qā'im, a sovereignty with which all divine messengers have been endowed and which "is inherently exercised by the Qā'im whether or not He appear in the world clothed in the majesty of earthly dominion" (*Book of Certitude*, 107/80). Such sovereignty, also known to the wider Shi'í tradition by the cognate and near synonym *walāya* (Persian: *valāyat/vilāyat*), is expressed (namely wielded), according to Baha'u'llah in this same work, through the revelation or words of the one divinely chosen. This divine word has the power to both separate—like a sword—and unite, as a word unites otherwise disparate and perhaps even otherwise uncongenial sounds and letters into a unit of meaning. In the following quotation, Baha'u'llah expands on this distinctive feature of Baha'í hermeneutics. Note also the reference in this passage to reunion and unification, fragrance and garment (*qamīs*), at the end of this passage. These "josephian" metaphors play a key role in signaling the "return of Joseph" and will be discussed further in the second part this chapter.

The following is an evidence of the sovereignty exercised by Muhammad, the Daystar of Truth. Have you not heard how with one single verse He sundered light from darkness, the righteous from the ungodly, and the believing from the infidel? All the signs and allusions concerning the Day of Judgment, which you have heard, such as the raising of the dead, the Day of Reckoning, the Last Judgment, and others, have been made manifest through the revelation of that verse. These revealed words were a blessing to the righteous who on hearing them exclaimed: "O God our Lord, we have heard, and obeyed." They were a curse to the people of iniquity who, on hearing them affirmed: "We have heard and rebelled." Those words, *sharp as the sword of God*, have separated the faithful from the infidel, and severed father from son. You have surely seen how they that have confessed their faith in him and they that rejected him have warred against each other, and sought one another's property. How many fathers have turned away from their sons; how many lovers have shunned

their beloved! So mercilessly trenchant was *this wondrous sword [in sayf-i badā']* of God that it cleft asunder every relationship! 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 [in amr badī' manī']* that it seemed as if they had sprung from the same loins.¹⁵ Such is the binding force of the Word of God, which unites the hearts of them that have renounced all else but Him, who have believed in His signs, and quaffed from the Hand of glory the Kawthar of God's holy grace.¹⁶ Furthermore, how numerous are those peoples of divers beliefs, of conflicting creeds, and opposing temperaments, who, through the *reviving fragrance* of the Divine springtime, blowing from the Ridván of God, have been arrayed with the new robe [*qamīs-i jadīd*] of divine Unity, and have drunk from the cup of His singleness!¹⁷ (*Book of Certitude*, 111–112/84–85, italics added)

Thus, the Awaited Imam (*al-imām al-muntazar*), the Master of the Age (*sāhib al-zamān*), the One who arises by Divine right (*al-qā'im bi 'l-haqq*), had been murdered through an act of violence by the very people who should have welcomed him with open hearts. The condemnation of such violent opposition to God's messengers may be thought a major theme of this book. Its source, Baha'u'llah says here, is selfishness, jealousy, egotism, and vested interest. Though never stated explicitly, the conclusion is certainly difficult to avoid coming to that the author thought it was also caused by an appalling, painful, and pathological lack of imagination. The exegeses performed in the *Iqān* offer imaginative and poetic ways of understanding various predictions about the return (*raj'a*) of the hidden or twelfth Imam, interpretations that are largely symbolic and metaphorical. As the answer to those who argue, for example, that the Imam (here associated with the Son of Man's return in clouds of heaven in Matthew 24:29–31) is expected to return "in the clouds" and have wrongly imagined them to be clouds of the meteorological variety, Baha'u'llah explains that in reality the word *cloud* must be understood quite differently:

And now regarding His words, that the Son of man shall "come in the clouds of heaven." By the term "clouds" is meant those things that are contrary to the ways and desires of men. Even as God has revealed in the verse already quoted: "As oft as an Apostle cometh unto you with that which your souls desire not, ye swell with pride, accusing some of being impostors and slaying others. [Qur'an 2:8]" 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." (*Book of Certitude*, 71–72/55)

Viewing such exegetical virtuosity in the context of the subsequent, fully articulated Baha'i ethos, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that, according to that ethos, violence may indeed be thought to stem from a general poverty of imagination.¹⁸ The Baha'i faith and teachings would eventually develop a new rhetoric, or what has been referred to as a distinctive "expressive style":¹⁹ distinctive, that is, with regard to the major concerns and guiding ethos of its parent religion, Twelver Shi'ism. Baha'u'llah wrote the above words not in Iran but in Baghdad, where he had been exiled as a result of a general government crackdown on the Babis. It has been suggested that Baghdad, as a much more cosmopolitan milieu than the comparatively xenophobic Tehran, provided an apt and congenial setting for the first formulation of Baha'i universalism (as distinct from Babi parochialism).²⁰

Baha'u'llah himself and his growing entourage came to be known and in fact to identify themselves as Babis until around 1868 when the adjective "Baha'i" started to be used more categorically. Even now though, the implication, at least to the uninitiated, is that we are speaking of Baha'i "Babism" as distinct from Azali "Babism."²¹ Explanations of the transition from Babi to Baha'i identities and orientations are spoken of in terms of "progressive revelation," a cardinal and distinctive Baha'i teaching that explains both history and religion in one gesture by asserting that all prophets have been sent by the same God from time to time in order to promote and carry forward an "ever-advancing civilization."²² Thus "civilization" as such is a distinct and explicit religious value in the Baha'i teachings. And, it may be thought to represent a particular "exegesis" of basic qur'anic pronouncements on the "sacramental value" of community (*umma*), social justice, and a searching contemplation of the cosmos, the self, and the holy books. Such Islamic beliefs are, in the Baha'i faith, universalized beyond their formative Arabo-islamicate matrix, and beyond their evolution or development in the more far-flung realms of later islamicate civilization.²³

Civilization, accordingly, in order to be true to itself must be peaceful. Thus, violence is completely outlawed in the Baha'i faith and the idea and law of "religiously sanctioned warfare" (cf. *jihad*) is, in conversation with and distinct from the Islamic tradition, completely, irrevocably, and unambiguously abrogated.²⁴ The time line of this abolition is also not open to dispute. It was first unambiguously and publicly identified with the religion of Baha'u'llah in 1863 in Baghdad, even though it appears to have been part of the noetic substance of a revelatory experience a year or so earlier.²⁵ While the spirit of this abolition is certainly prominent in Baha'u'llah's *Most Holy Book*, composed in Ottoman Palestine, in 1873, it is in a later composition that religiously sanctioned warfare is again specifically outlawed in no uncertain terms.²⁶

In a brief work composed toward the end of his life, known as the *Tablet of Glad-Tidings* (*Lawh al-bisharat*), Baha'u'llah listed the major principles of his new religion.²⁷ The fifteen distinct laws or verities may be thought a precursor to the

later, perhaps more widely circulated, “Twelve Principles of the Baha’i Faith.”²⁸ At this earlier stage, they are, in this order:

- (1) the abolition of religiously mandated warfare;
- (2) lifting the ban on associating with followers of other religions;
- (3) the promotion of a universal language;
- (4) the obligation to support any “king” who arises to protect the beleaguered new religion;
- (5a) enjoining obedience to the laws of the country in which any of his followers reside;
- (5b) enjoining the inhabitants of the world to aid his persecuted followers so that the “light of unity and concord may shine forth and shed its radiance upon the world”;
- (5c) the hope that all weapons of war be converted “into instruments of reconstruction and that strife and conflict may be removed from the midst of men”;
- (6) the principle of the Lesser Peace;²⁹
- (7) people are permitted to wear whatever clothing they wish and to cut their hair anyway they wish as long as they do not allow themselves to become “playthings of the ignorant”;
- (8) the abolition of celibacy and monasticism of all kinds so that “monks and priests” may live in the world and enter into wedlock to “bring forth one who will make mention of God”;
- (9) one must seek forgiveness from God alone; confession to fellow creatures is prohibited (when followed by a prayer for forgiveness);
- (10) the prohibition of the destruction of books;
- (11) permission to study arts and sciences that are beneficial;
- (12) the obligation to acquire a trade or profession—work and trade are regarded as a form of worship.

The first principle or “good news” is expressed as follows:

O People of the World! The first Glad-Tidings [*bishāra*] which the Mother Book has, in this Most Great Revelation, imparted unto all the peoples of the world is that the law of *jihād* has been blotted out from the Book [*ya ahl-i ard bishārat-i avval kih az umm al-kitāb dar in zuhūr-i a’zam bi-jāmi’-i ahl-i ‘alam ‘ināyat shud mahv-i hukm-i jihād ast az kitāb*]. Glorified be the All-Merciful, the Lord of grace abounding, through Whom the door of heavenly bounty has been flung open in the face of all that are in heaven and on earth.³⁰

The explicit mention here of the familiar, frequently vexing, originally qur’anic term *jihād* indicates that there is no ambiguity about this law. *Jihād* is neither explained nor interpreted; it is simply abolished. This bold proclamation should

be seen as one of the chief means whereby the founder of the Baha'i faith sought to distinguish his religion from traditional Islam. It may be, as is certainly the case with the tenth principle (against the destruction of books), that the first audience here was the Babis themselves, there having been serious and prolonged disagreement, since the execution of the Bab, about precisely such matters as religiously mandated violence and other distinctively and traditionally unexceptionable topics found mentioned in the writings of the Bab.³¹ But it is also obvious from the text that these "glad tidings" are addressed to humanity in general. Furthermore, according to recent scholarship, the tablet itself was first sent specifically to the leaders of thought and state in Britain and Russia, probably as the result of a contemporary event that called into question the Baha'i attitude toward violence.³² By this time, Baha'u'llah had successfully created a peaceable, law-abiding community out of the rather roiling welter of Babi disarray, in which there had been, for example, obvious and dramatic controversy over the role and status (if any) of *jihād* in what we saw referred to above in the quotation from the *Book of Certitude* as the "new Revelation [*amr-i badī*]." ³³ To the extent that this was achieved, the resulting community ultimately came to be known as Baha'i.

THE RETURN OF JOSEPH

The Baha'i era is held to have begun on the evening of May 22, 1844/1260 (that is, at onset of the Twelver Millennium) in Shiraz. This is when the young merchant, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad (known to history as the Bab), began the composition of a highly unique commentary, itself cast in the form of the Qur'an complete with separate suras (with titles), *āyas*, the number and place of revelation indicated, and, in the oldest manuscripts, marginal indications where prostration should occur. The medium was the message: a new revelation had happened.³⁴ This unusual Qur'an commentary (*tafsīr*), presented as a "new" Qur'an—or more accurately the "original" uncorrupted Qur'an, which until now had been in the keeping of the hidden Imam—was restricted to one qur'anic chapter, the sura of Joseph.³⁵ Later Baha'i readers see this as an allusion to and prophecy of Baha'u'llah's advent (*zuhūr*), a return of the True Joseph.³⁶

Without delving into great detail, I would like simply now to emphasize that, of all the qur'anic prophets and messengers, Joseph is distinguished by his moral and physical beauty, a major component of which is his willingness to forgive his faithless brothers their evil betrayal. In an act of world-changing tolerance, wisdom, and forbearance, he summons the hitherto scattered forces of his holy lineage to become the salvation and preservation of Israel and, from the point of view of Islam, the prophecy—or, perhaps better stated, God's very connection with the world. In Arabic, such tolerance, wisdom, and forbearance are combined in the word *hilm*. *Hilm* is a frequent word in the Qur'an, where it appears in the divine

attribute *al-halīm*, indicating God as the *par excellence* model and source of long-suffering, patience, control of anger, tolerance, slowness to punish, gentleness, and wisdom.³⁷ Its meaning and moral scope is exemplified in numerous instances in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the stories of the Prophets, and in the overall literary and poetic heritage of islamicate culture.

In line with the qur'anic logic of prophecy, all prophets are endowed with this and every other noble moral virtue, but some are more exemplary of this or that virtue than others.³⁸ Of the many examples of this virtue that have been celebrated and admired in Islam, whether Sunni, Shi'i, or Sufi of whatever specific iteration, or even at the "nonaligned" level of the folktale, none is more characteristic, compelling, or universally admired than the way in which the prophet Joseph, son of Jacob, exemplified this all-important religious virtue in his dealings with those who betrayed him. According to the qur'anic telling of his life in the sura of Joseph, his betrayers are his brothers, the wife of the powerful Egyptian into whose household he had been sold as a slave, her husband the powerful Egyptian himself, and the fellow prisoner who broke his jailhouse promise.³⁹ Certainly many other prophets (and indeed other heroic or powerful figures in Islam or Islamic history, including the controversial Mu'awiya) exemplify this distinctively Islamic virtue.⁴⁰ But Joseph is arguably the prime example. Without raising the problematic question of causality, I suggest that the Baha'i elimination of violence, vengeance, religiously mandated violence, and indeed hatred is a reflection of the image of Joseph and its centrality in its own particular ethos and history. This unites the various streams of influence and discourse flowing from the Qur'an, its exegesis, and its contemplation within both Sunni and more particularly Shi'i contexts. It also unites the whole range of islamicate moralia and pedagogy (*adab/akhlāq*), poetry (mystical and profane), specific tonalities of Twelver Shi'i piety, and eschatology that, by the time of the genesis and rise of the Baha'i faith, had become seamlessly joined to the greater mystical and spiritual tradition of Islam.

The word *bishāra*, "glad tidings," from the title of the tablet summarized above, is not qur'anic. But the basic root idea is frequent in the form of *bashīr*, "bearer of good tidings."⁴¹ As such, it often occurs with a companion term, warner (*nadhīr*), as one half of the prophetic office, as it were. Muhammad is described as such in Q 2:119, 5:19, 7:188, 11:2, 34:28, 35:24, 41:4.⁴² The remaining instance of *bashīr* occurs in the famous scene in the sura of Joseph (12:96) when after long years languishing in painful and blinding separation from his beloved son, Jacob miraculously detects—and at great distance—the presence of Joseph from the scent of his famous, spiritually charged shirt (*qamis*). The joy of such a perception is indescribable, and this is probably why the Qur'an presents it in such a striking scene. If it were a film, it would function as a dramatic cutaway. Joseph's brothers are crossing "the border" separating Egypt and Canaan. The scene shifts instantly to the aged Jacob, languishing a great distance from this border (presumably in the family

pasturage in north Canaan) and sensitized through his deep abiding and prophetic love, who immediately senses through the extraordinary shirt (*qamīs*) which the brothers are bringing to him that his beloved and heretofore bitterly lamented son Joseph lives:

And as soon as the caravan [with which Jacob's sons were traveling] was on its way [*falamma fasalat al-'ir*], their father said [to the people around him]: "Behold, were it not that you might consider me a dotard, [I would say that] I truly feel the breath of Joseph [in the air]!" (Q 12:94)

In the previous verse, the previously hidden and now manifest Joseph had instructed his brothers to take this shirt back to their home and to lay it on the eyes of their blinded-by-grief father so that his sight would be renewed:

"Go with this my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father: he will come to see (clearly). Then return (here) to me together with all your family." (Q 12:93)

The Qur'an continues:

Then, when the bearer of good news [*bashīr*] came and placed the shirt on to Jacob's face, his eyesight returned and he said, "Did I not tell you that I have knowledge from God that you do not have." (Q 12:96)

It is of some interest to note that another form of the same root *B-SH-R* occurs early in the this story at Q 12:19, precisely when Joseph is discovered in the well by the traveling caravan that would then purchase him from his perfidious brothers and remove him to Egypt, thus beginning the crushing separation from Jacob:

Some travelers came by. They sent someone to draw water and he let down his bucket. "Good news [*bushrā*]!" he exclaimed. "Here is a boy!" They hid him like a piece of merchandise—God was well aware of what they did.⁴³

The prophetic career of Joseph had long been of special interest and importance to the Ithna 'ashari Shi'a for a number of reasons. In the Shi'i understanding of the qur'anic account, Joseph is distinguished as an embodiment of the mystery and confluence of divine selection, occultation, and pious dissimulation (*walāya*, *ghayba*, and *taqiyya*), three very important Shi'i religious "sacramental" categories. In addition, the entire story may be characterized as "an apocalypse of reunion,"⁴⁴ emblematic of the important and distinctive Shi'i doctrine of "return" (*raj'a*) in which this eschaton is typologically prefigured in the qur'anic reuniting of Joseph with his family.⁴⁵ There are several other interesting features of the twelfth sura that were taken to the bosom of Shi'ism; but it may be the figure of Joseph as a peacemaker—benevolent, patient, chaste, pious, and wise—that captured the imagination of the founders of the Baha'i tradition.⁴⁶ Joseph orders no war. On the contrary, he forgives those who betrayed him. In this particular context, it is difficult to avoid the

thought that it is through the powerful example of Joseph that the Shi'i community may be able to find the strength and courage to forgive the Sunni community (and, of course, vice versa). Such "iron in the soul" appears to be something highly important to the Baha'i tradition.⁴⁷

Joseph also qualifies as an example and type of the *Verus Propheta*, or ruling prophet (on the ancient model of Melchizedek), in which both spiritual and worldly/political authority are clearly vested and perfectly combined, as in the Shi'i ideal of the Imam.⁴⁸ The continuation of such veneration in the Baha'i faith may be thought a logical development from both the Shi'i and the Sufi traditions, a veneration that begins in earnest with the Bab's remarkable *tafsīr* on Q 12 and continues through the many allusions and references to the Joseph story scattered throughout the writings of Baha'u'llah.⁴⁹ For example, in the *Most Holy Book* (*Kitāb Aqdas*), written in 1873 by Baha'u'llah, after he had been further exiled from Iran through Baghdad to Istanbul, Edirne, and finally 'Akka in what was then Ottoman Palestine, we find the following characteristic reference to the story of Joseph in which the "josephian" metaphors of beauty, scent, garment, blindness, heartbreak healed, and family reunited are clearly combined with the idea of divine messenger and "administrative or legislative wisdom." Note also the qur'anic diction of this passage, beginning with the characteristic imperative "Say" (*qul*):

Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savor of My garment [*qamīsī*] can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power has, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty [*hubban li-jamālī*]." Happy is the lover that has inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe. By My life! He who has drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favor will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.

Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. On the contrary, We have unsealed the choice Wine [*al-rahiq al-makhtūm*] with the fingers of might and power. To this bears witness that which the Pen of Revelation has revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight! (*Most Holy Book*, para. 4, 20–21/3–4)

THE TABLET OF THE TRUE SEEKER

The question of "religiously mandated combat" (*jihād*)—or more precisely the "religiously motivated warrior" (*mujāhid*), "one who struggles in holy combat"—had arisen much earlier, in the same *Book of Certitude* excerpted above. Again, writing in Baghdad in the wake of several severely violent clashes between the followers of the Bab and the forces of the Shah, Baha'u'llah, in what seems to be a parenthesis to his general plan to elucidate the divine truth of the Bab's mission,

defines this “warrior” in a lengthy passage now known in the Baha’i community as the “Tablet of the True Seeker.” What follows is a brief examination and explication of a few key passages containing the theme of “combat” and those josephian metaphors indicated above. The tablet (*lawh*) opens as follows:

But, O my brother, when a true seeker (*mujāhid*) determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. (*Book of Certitude*, 192/148–49)⁵⁰

Although a thorough analysis of the entire tablet is not possible here, suffice it to mention that neither here nor anywhere in the rest of the *Book of Certitude* (or anywhere else in the Baha’i writings) is there any suggestion that those engaged in the pursuit of truth and the quest for divine nearness in this the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*: the fulfillment of the Shi’i eschaton) are expected to bear actual arms and engage in anything resembling armed or military activity. On the contrary, the remainder of the “Tablet of the True Seeker” is concerned with inculcating spiritual, moral, and ethical standards reminiscent of the preaching of the earliest Sufi masters such as Muhasibi (d. 857), Junayd (d. 910), Hallaj (d. 922), and al-Makki (d. 996), which is consolidated in the work of Ghazali (d. 1111). The tablet also echoes themes and insights developed in the later Islamic spiritual and mystical traditions by such luminaries as Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), Rūmi (d. 1273), and Shabistari (d. 1340), to name only three of the numerous religious virtuosi whose own mystical and spiritual struggle, including literary composition, contributed to the culture from which the Baha’i faith emerged, a culture whose study is necessary for a proper understanding of Baha’i teachings.⁵¹ In the “Tablet of the True Seeker,” any explicit Shi’i references are confined—in addition to the quoting of specifically Shi’i Hadith mentioned earlier—to the general if not generic sense of expectation and fulfillment, a sense not out of place within Sunni Islam after all.⁵² As the passages excerpted here show, the central, pervasive metaphors of scent, messenger, separation and distance, and knowledge and reunion represent a typological reiteration of the story of Joseph in the Qur’an. Here is a Joseph who, through the exemplification of forbearance, tolerance, and long-suffering, transforms the earlier betrayal of his brothers into a spiritual event that, devoid of violence and bitterness, serves to cause the reunion and healing of the fractured family, a family which in Baha’i thought is emblematic of humanity.

In the excerpts below, the reader experienced with Islamic mystical works will see much that is familiar. Yet the combination of the idea of “holy struggle” (*jihād*) with the josephian imagery and metaphors of beauty, lover and beloved (Jacob and Joseph, Zulaykha and Joseph), attainment of spiritual knowledge, scent and perfume as an emblem of or metaphor for spiritual knowledge, and the related

elements of the qur'anic narrative seems to set the tone of the Baha'i ethos in an original and creative way. The tablet continues:

He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertains to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth. Even as you see in this Day how most of the people, because of such love and hate, are bereft of the immortal Face, have strayed far from the embodiments of the divine mysteries, and, shepherdless, are roaming through the wilderness of oblivion and error. That seeker must, at all times, put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, must detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords. He must never seek to exalt himself above any one, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vain-glory, must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence and refrain from idle talk. For the tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumes the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devours both heart and soul. The force of the former lasts but for a time, while the effects of the latter endures a century.

The next passage offers again explicit reference to a *jihād* restricted to the spiritual or existential realm:

These are among the attributes of the exalted [*'ālin*], and constitute the hall-mark of the spiritually-minded [*rūhāniyīn*]. They have already been mentioned in connection with the requirements of the wayfarers [*sharā'it-i mujāhidīn wa mashy-i sālikīn*] that tread the path of the pursuit of the knowledge of certitude [*dar manāhij-i 'ilm al-yaqīn*]. When the detached wayfarer [*sālik-i farīgh*] and sincere seeker [*tālib-i sādiq*] has fulfilled these essential conditions [*ba'd az tahaqquq in maqamāt*], then and only then can he be called a true seeker [*laf' mujāhid dar barih-yi 'ū sādiq mi'ayad*]. Whenever he has fulfilled the conditions implied in the verse: "Those who make efforts for Us [*al-ladhīna jāhadū fīna*]," (Qur'an 29:69) he shall enjoy the blessings conferred by the words: "In Our Ways shall We assuredly guide him." (Q 29:69)

In the following paragraph we see a return to those traditional moral, ethical virtues and themes associated with Sufism. This is a prelude to the dramatic reference to precisely the "messenger of joy" (*bashīr*), translated here as "Mystic Herald," who brings the glad tidings of the "return" of Joseph (something of an apocalyptic reversal, since it is in reality the family, led by Jacob, who "returns" to him). That the adjective *apocalyptic* is appropriate is borne out by mention of, among other allusions, the qur'anic image of the Trumpet Blast, immediately followed by reference to the new creation or new life that results from this spiritual event/experience:

Only when the lamp of search [*sirāj-i talab*], of earnest striving [*mujāhada*], of long-
ing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy [*dhawq*,

shawq, 'ishq, *walah*, *jadhb*, *hubb*) is kindled within the seeker's heart [*dar qalb rawshan shud*], and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. At that hour will the Mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn [*dar an hin bashir-i ma'navi bi-bisharat-i ruhani az madinah-yi ilahi chun subh-i sadiq tali' shavad*], and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of heedlessness [*wa qalb wa nafs wa ruh ra bi-sur ma'rifat az nawm-i ghaflat bidar namayad*]. Then will the manifold favors and outpouring grace of the holy and everlasting Spirit [*ruh al-quds-i samadani*] confer such new life [*hayat-i tazah-yi jadid*] upon the seeker that he will find himself endowed with a new eye [*chishm-i jadid*], a new ear [*gush-i badi'*], a new heart, and a new mind [*qalb wa fu'ad-i tazah*]. He will contemplate the manifest signs of the universe, and will penetrate the hidden mysteries of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leads him to the stations of absolute certitude. He will discover in all things the mysteries of divine revelation, and the evidences of an everlasting manifestation.

Joseph and his story are present again in the following direct continuation of the preceding excerpt, especially in speaking of detecting the "fragrance of God" from a great distance and also in the reference to perfume, breath, and fragrance in other contexts:

I swear by God! Were he that treads the path of guidance [*salik-i sabil-i hudā*] and seeks to scale the heights of righteousness [*talib-i ma'arj-i taqi*] to attain unto this glorious and exalted station [*bih in maqam-i buland-i a'la wasil gardad*], he would inhale, at a distance of a thousand leagues, the fragrance of God [*ra'ihah-yi haqq ra az farasangha-yi ba'idih istinshaq namayad*], and would perceive the resplendent morn of a divine guidance rising above the day spring of all things [*wa subh-i nurani-yi hidayat ra az mashriq-i kull-i shay' idrak kunad*]. Each and every thing, however small, would be to him a revelation, leading him to his Beloved, the Object of his quest. So great shall be the discernment of this seeker that he will discriminate between truth and falsehood, even as he doth distinguish the sun from shadow. If in the uttermost corners of the East the sweet savors of God be wafted, he will assuredly recognize and inhale their fragrance, even though he be dwelling in the uttermost ends of the West [*mathalan agar nasim-i haqq az mashriq-i ibda' wazad wa 'u dar maghrib-i ikhtira' bashad al-battah istishmam kunad*]. . . . When the channel of the human soul is cleansed of all worldly and impeding attachments, it will unfailingly perceive the breath of the Beloved across immeasurable distances, and will, led by its perfume, attain and enter the City of Certitude. . . . With both his inner and outer ear, he will hear from its dust the hymns of glory and praise ascending unto the Lord of Lords, and with his inner eye will he discover the mysteries of "return" and "revival" [*wa asrar-i rujū' wa iyāb ra bi-chashm-i sirr mulāhazah farmayad*]. . . . The attainment unto this City quenches thirst without water, and

kindles the love of God without fire. Within every blade of grass are enshrined the mysteries of an inscrutable Wisdom, and upon every rose-bush a myriad nightingales pour out, in blissful rapture, their melody. Its wondrous tulips unfold the mystery of the undying Fire in the Burning Bush [*nār-i mūsawī*], and its sweet savors of holiness breathe the perfume of the Messianic Spirit [*wa az nafahāt-i qudsiyyah-ash nafkhah-yi rûh al-qudus-i 'isawi bâhir*]. It bestows wealth without gold, and confers immortality without death. In each one of its leaves ineffable delights are treasured, and within every chamber unnumbered mysteries lie hidden.

The tablet concludes with a reiteration of the nature of *jihād* in using the by now familiar words *religiously motivated warrior* (*mujāhid*) and *struggle* (*juhd*). The agony of separation (cf. Jacob's separation from Joseph) is conjured here as well:

They that valiantly labor in quest of God [*wa mujaāidin fi Allāh*], will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, be so attached and wedded to that City, that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable. . . . Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and readorned [*dar ra's-i hizār sanah aw azyad aw aqall tajdīd shavad wa tazyīn yābad*].

Wherefore, O my friend, it behooves us to exert the highest endeavour to attain that City [*bāyad juhdi numūd tā bih ān madīnah wāsil shawīm*], and by the grace of God and His loving-kindness, rend asunder the "veils of glory" [*kashf-i subūhat-i jalāl*]; so that with inflexible steadfastness, we may sacrifice our drooping souls in the path of the new beloved [*dar rāh-i mahbūb-i tāzah*]. . . . That City is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation [*ān madīnah kutub-i ilahiyyah ast dar har 'ahdī*]. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus, the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, the Qur'ān; in this day, the Bayan; and in the Dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest, His own Book [*dar 'ahd-i man yab'athuhu allāh kitāb-i 'ū*]—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred [*kih rujū'-i kull-i kutub bih ān ast*], . . . Upon detached souls [those Books] bestow the gift of Unity. (*Book of Certitude*, 192–200/148–54)

CONCLUSION

Islam, beginning with the Qur'an, divides history into two main eras. The one is characterized by savagery, barbarity, brutality, ignorance, and violence and is designated to by the Arabic word *jahl*. The other, characterized by the Arabic word *islām*, comes to stand for everything opposite to *jahl*. *Jahl* is personified in the Qur'an by, among others, the pre-Islamic Arabs whose way of life was characterized by pride in bravery, vengeance, tempestuous anger, and a fatalistic disdain for consequence. *Islam* is personified in the lives of the prophets and messengers sent, since the beginning of time, to every community (Q 10:47). Since, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, violence has its root meaning in impetuosity and

vehemence, there may be some truth to the idea that Islam itself arose in response to such human failings in addition to the more theologically abstract ideas of “polytheism” (*shirk*) and “ingratitude and faithlessness” (*kufr*), as these were seen to characterize the pre-Islamic era known as the Time of Ignorance, *jāhiliyya*. But *jahl*, from a linguistic point of view, is not merely the opposite of knowledge and the act of knowing (*‘ilm*), but rather the opposite of *hilm*, the rich, multisemic Arabic word introduced earlier that means patience, forbearance (bordering on forgiveness), and a complete absence of flaring anger and violence. Further, it emerges that *hilm* is, in some ways, synonymous with *islām*.⁵³ It is therefore perhaps natural that the Baha’i teachings, as a distinct development-cum-interpretation of islamicate moral, spiritual, and social values and practices, outlaw not only *jihād* as such, but violence of any kind. This appears to be nonnegotiable. The one exception is in the case of aggression when it is not merely permissible but obligatory to rise up against it. This would seem also to posit a type of violence—whether physical or spiritual in force—that is necessary when combating aggression.

One of the striking results of the Safavid “venture” (1501–1722), when Shi’ism for the first time in centuries became consolidated as the official religion of a distinct polity, was the transposition of Twelver Shi’ism from the “key of Arabic” to the “key of Persian.” Joseph had always loomed especially important in persianate Islam,⁵⁴ whether as a symbol of divine kingship (and therefore “civilization as such”) or as an example of the kind of moral and ethical restraint and wisdom in governance—indicated in the term *hilm*—that lends a particular élan to his holy heroism. As such, he is an exemplar for kings and shahs, sufi shaykhs, their disciples, and the common “average” Muslim, who, as this tradition so wisely observes, is assaulted by the same passions as the king. The *halim* is, in the final analysis, the civilized man whose soul is formed by the energies and expectations of the last divine revelation: a true Muslim. As such, he is the polar opposite of the *jāhil*, the savage, uncivilized inhabitant of a brutal world, unregenerated by and ungrateful for revelation, the word of God.⁵⁵

It was during the nineteenth century, perhaps with the photographed horrors of the American Civil War, that the glory associated with military might and achievement began to diminish, a process that seems to have ended in the abject brutality and carnage of World War I, the Great War. The Baha’i teachings are therefore very much in harmony with what might be thought a particular *Zeitgeist*: the world was becoming smaller, a new globalization was on the horizon. Baha’u’llah saw this, as is clear from his many writings on the oneness of humanity, the oneness of the world, and the oneness of religion and God. It is also clear that these freshly articulated ideas had a history, especially in Islam, the parent religion and culture of the first three central figures of the Baha’i faith: the Bab, Baha’u’llah, and ‘Abdu’l-Baha. I have argued elsewhere that to some extent Baha’i irenics may be seen as a response to, in the first place, the violent and brutal animosity that

had split and aggravated anew the unity of the post-Muhammadan Muslim world.⁵⁶ With the rise in the later medieval and premodern periods of the three mutually exclusive islamicate imperial protonations, the Ottoman, the Mughal, and the Safavid, such disunity and estrangement became reified, certainly politicized, and frequently dramatized. Figuring thereby a distinctive islamicate modernity, these new alignments and rivalries sought, through what might be thought more purely religious emblems, to mobilize loyalties and enmities. The late Henry Corbin's designation of Twelver Shi'ism as a "*religion d'amour par excellence*" accurately captures one arc of Shi'i piety, namely the central and defining attitude and relationship of allegiance to charismatic absolute authority (*walāya*).⁵⁷ The other arc, one that may complete the circle of Twelver Shi'i religious dynamism, has been characterized as "sacred hatred."⁵⁸ The operative technical term is *ta-barra*, a companion concept for *tawalla* (from W-L-Y, which is also the basis for the word *walāya*) built on the root verb *bari'a* (from B-R-'A):

For the imams, *bara'a* [or *tabarrī*] is the indispensable complement to, and opposite of, *walāya* [or *tawallī*]. If we translate *walāya* [or *tawallī*] by "faithful, tender love" of the Imam, then *bara'a* [or *tabarrī*] would be "wild, implacable hatred" of the Enemy of the Imam. . . . According to the imams, one cannot fully love the Imam and his Cause without simultaneously hating the Enemy opposed to him and to his Cause since the time of creation; the "believer" who is faithful to the imams should pledge Love and Obedience to the Master who initiates him into the divine Sciences, and Hatred and Disobedience to him who stands for the opposite of this Initiation. If the world is the way it is, invaded by evil and darkness that will only increase until the triumphal return of the Mahdi, it is because the Masters of Injustice and the mass majority [*'amma*] that follows them are dominant, condemning the Sages and the chosen minority [*khassa*] that follows them to isolation and suffering. . . . [T]he imams have forbidden their faithful to show their Hatred or their Disobedience in the form of revolt or open insurrection; *bara'a* should thus remain interiorized (just as is the case for *walāya*, because of the danger of death for the person who professes it) until the return of the hidden imam, even if on the outside obedience to the unjust is forced; this is one of the facets of the Battle that has forever opposed the initiated and the counter initiated; *sabb al-sahāba* [insulting or even damning members of the early community seen as enemies of the Shi'] is one way of upholding it.⁵⁹

History of Religions, including the anthropology of religion and other related disciplines, tells us that what we refer to as religion or religions includes a vast number of "systems" for affirming identity, making sense of the world, and pursuing happiness (for lack of a better term). It also tells us that because it is a human activity the contents of one may be found in all. The particularity of the phenomenon exists not in the utter novelty of its constituent forms and orientations, its rituals and doctrines. Rather, the distinctiveness of this or that tradition resides

in the degree and particular way in which it emphasizes and prioritizes an otherwise commonly held element in a creative or distinctive manner. Frequently, the difference between traditions is subtle, at least at the borders. Perhaps it is a bit like the light spectrum or a rainbow. It is not always easy to pinpoint precisely where violet becomes blue, but we know it does, as it were, after the fact. And once the two become distinct, they can never be assimilated again.

It may well be that the founders of the Baha'ī religion were expressing a general cultural exhaustion with such powerful spiritual incongruities, non sequiturs, and contradictions as are implied in such formulae as “sacred hatred.” The first audience of the earliest Baha'ī kerygma was, after all, Islam itself, an Islam that was not only patently suffering as a result of its own internally generated challenges but that had relatively recently fallen prey to a rather full catalogue of ills as a result of imperial and colonial interests from beyond the abode of Islam.⁶⁰ The gospel of harmony, peace, and nonviolence that so has characterized the Baha'ī message from its beginning until today was certainly first heard by Muslims for whom the tragedy of the first Fitnah, the apparently irreparable breaking of the unity of the *umma*, was not really a thing of the past but an ever-present heartbreak, embarrassment, and shame drawing attention to the all-too human failings of egoism, jealousy, envy, betrayal, and greed. That this message came later to be addressed to and taken to heart by a wider “constituency” beyond the traditional historical, religious, and cultural borders of the Dar al-Islam simultaneously celebrates and laments a common humanity. It also casts a warm light on the inexhaustible spiritual resources of Islam, the parent religion of the Baha'ī faith.

NOTES

1. The new book by Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010) argues that this was in fact the driving purpose of the original preaching of Muhammad.

2. Continuing this theme of nonviolence, Baha'ū'llāh's son and successor, *Abdu'l-Baha'*, the title by which Abbas Effendi (1844–1921) is most widely known, has left numerous, emphatic pronouncements, such as the following:

True religion is based upon love and agreement. Bahā'ū'llāh has said, “If religion and faith are the causes of enmity and sedition, it is far better to be nonreligious, and the absence of religion would be preferable; for we desire religion to be the cause of amity and fellowship. If enmity and hatred exist, irreligion is preferable.” Therefore, the removal of this dissension has been specialized in Bahā'ū'llāh, for religion is the divine remedy for human antagonism and discord. But when we make the remedy the cause of the disease, it would be better to do without the remedy. (Bosch Baha'ī School, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* [Santa Cruz, CA: Bosch Baha'ī School, (1983)], 231)

3. In his history of the first 100 years of the Baha'ī Faith, first published in 1944, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (d. 1957), the first and only Guardian of the Baha'ī faith (*walī amr Allāh*), wrote: “I shall seek

to represent and correlate, in however cursory a manner, those momentous happenings which have insensibly, relentlessly, and under the very eyes of successive generations, perverse, indifferent or hostile, transformed a heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot of the Shaykhí school of the Ithnā-ʿAshariyyah sect of Shíʿah Islām into a world religion . . . whose adherents are recruited from the diversified races and chief religions of mankind” Shoghi Effendi [Rabbānī], *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Baháʿí Publishing Trust, 1970), xii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

4. Todd Lawson, “Interpretation as Revelation: The Qurʾan Commentary of Sayyid ʿAli Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾan*, ed. A. Rippin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 223–53. On the question of genre in Bahaʿi scripture, see Franklin Lewis, “Scripture as Literature: Sifting through the Layers of the Text,” *Bahaʿi Studies Review* 7 (1997): 125–46.

5. Christopher Buck, *Symbol And Secret: Qurʾan Commentary in Bahaʿuʾllāh’s Kitāb-i iqān* (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1995).

6. The standard scholarly discussion of the rise of the Babi religion is Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

7. With the passive construction of the participle comes the idea that these Fourteen are not pure by their own efforts; it emphasizes, rather, that they are protected from sin and error by God.

8. By the ninth century C.E. (third century A.H.), various interpretations of Islam had come to be known by the designations Sunni and Shiʿi. Within Shiʿism there were further subdivisions based on the number of post-Muhammadan religious authorities, namely Imams, who were recognized. The group most pertinent to the study of the rise and development of the beliefs and practices of the Bahaʿi faith, the Imami or Jaʿfari Shiʿis, are also known as the “Twelvers” (Arabic: *Ithna-ʿashariyya*). Two other Shiʿi groups are frequently, if erroneously, designated “Fivers” (Zaydiyya) and “Sevensers” (Ismaʿiliyya) by analogy. Of these latter two numerical designations, the first is not found in the medieval literature. See Heinz Halm, “Sabʿiyya,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd Edition*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, and G. Lecomte (Leiden: Brill, 1986–c. 2000), 8:683. Hereafter cited as *EI2*.

9. Sholeh Quinn and Stephen Lambden, “Ketab-e Iqan,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. Ihsan Yarshater (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985–c. 2000), www.iranicaonline.org. Hereafter cited as *EIr*.

10. Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985), 45, 165–70; W. Madelung, “Kaʿim Al Muhammad,” in *EI2* 4:456–57.

11. I am unaware of any explicit commentary on this epithet by Bahaʿuʾllāh. It is possible that such a commentary would employ the familiar (at least in Bahaʿi writings) figure, or a variation thereon, of “the sword of good character” found throughout his writings.

12. There are, of course, no such things as sacraments in Islam, whether Shiʿi or Sunni. I use the word here as an analogy—surely imperfect, as all good analogies are—for structures, doctrines, and institutions in Islam that function *somewhat like sacraments*, which according to Augustine of Hippo are “visible signs of an invisible reality.” In Islamic sources a number of phenomena could thus qualify, from the ubiquitous and mightily charged “with the grandeur of God” *ayat* or divine signs, to the more complex, less automatic phenomena and functions such as the community (*umma*), history, and revelation. It may be that what I am thinking of as sacraments also corresponds, however obliquely, to those “doors” described and analyzed in John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

13. When quoting Bahaʿi scripture, the first page number is to the English translation and the second to the original language, either Arabic, Persian, or a combination of these two. In this instance the reference is to Bahaʿuʾllāh, *The Kitāb-i-Iqān: The Book of Certitude Revealed by Bahaʿuʾllāh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (1931; Wilmette: Bahaʿi Publishing Trust, 1970). The Persian original is Bahaʿuʾllāh, *Kitāb-i mustatab-i iqān* (Cairo: Farajʿuʾllāh Zaki, 1934), reprinted in 1980 C.E./136 B.E. (Bahaʿi Era) by Baháʿí-Verlag, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahaʿis of Germany. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

cally in the text. In some instances with regard to both this work and others quoted below, slight adjustments have been made to the “official” translation, including capitalization and the use of more archaic diction to conform to the editorial style of this volume. All extended citations are allowed in view of Baha’i community’s liberal usage of foundational texts.

14. See Michael Zwettler, “Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of the Poets and the Qur’anic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–119.

15. *az yek sulb zāhir shudeh*: a clear, if mildly ironic, allusion to the day of *alast* tradition based on Q 7:172.

16. This sentence is in quotation marks in the original. I do not know the source. It is perhaps a Hadith. The comments in ‘Abd al-Hamid Ishraq-khavari (*Qamūs*, 3:1294–95) do not suggest a source. *Kawthar* (abundance) is generally identified as either a pool or river in Paradise.

17. Though it is not precisely clear which (if any) verse is being specified, in a brief exegetical article dedicated to this very sentence (*Qamūs*, 1:363–65) the author suggests the possibility of Q 7:158: “O humankind! I am sent unto you all, as the Messenger of Allah, to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth” (*Qamūs*, 1:364; thanks to Dr. Mina Yazdani for this reference). Other suggestions include Q 54:1 and 13:31 (Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, 210). The point may be independent of which specific verse is referred to and may be seen as descriptive of the virtues of the divine word in general. By its very nature, it divides the world into those who believe and those who reject. And, by its very nature, it unites those who believe. This is a standard Shi’i orientation, though, as we see below, many of the more divisive and convulsive energies of such an orientation are neutralized in such distinctive Baha’i scriptural passages as the Tablet of the True Seeker (see below), where the drama of the traditional Shi’i apocalypse is transferred to the realm of spiritual search and enlightenment, both individual and communal.

18. A fine study of these literary and hermeneutical issues as they may pertain to the *Book of Certitude* is, in addition to the article by Lewis (“Scripture as Literature”), the groundbreaking work of Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret*.

19. Alessandro Bausani, “Some Aspects of the Baha’i Expressive Style,” *World Order* 13 (1978–79): 36–43.

20. Todd Lawson, “Globalization and the *Hidden Words*,” in *Baha’i and Globalisation*, ed. Margit Warburg, Annika Hvithamar, and Morten Warmind (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 35–36.

21. On the division of the Babis into Azalis and Baha’is, see Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha’u’llah* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977), 2:161–70.

22. “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.” Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1969), 215. Baha’u’llah, *Muntakhabati az athar-i Hadrat-i Baha’u’llah* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’í-Verlag, 1984), 140: *jami’ az bara’yi islah-i ‘alam khalq shudah and*.

23. Though the order and even substance of these principles can appear differently, one such list is: (1) unity of God; (2) unity of religion; (3) unity of humanity; (4) equality of men and women; (5) elimination of all forms of prejudice; (6) world peace; (7) harmony of science and religion; (8) independent investigation of truth; (9) universal compulsory education; (10) universal auxiliary language; (11) civil obedience and noninvolvement in partisan politics; (12) elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty.

24. Such a position should not be mistaken for pacifism. See, e.g., below, the quotation from ‘Abdu’l-Baha’.

25. [*The Tablet of Ridván/Lawh-i Ridván* =] Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings*, #XIV. On the announcement of the abolition of *jihad* in this work, see Stephen Lambden, “Some Notes on Baha’u’llah’s Gradually Evolving Claims of the Adrianople/Edirne Period,” *Baha’i Studies Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (June 1984): 4–67.

For commentary, analysis, and further publication and translation details, see Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 115–16.

26. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitáb-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Mona Vale, NSW: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1993), para. 159, 76–77/159: “It has been forbidden to you to carry arms unless essential” (*harrama ‘alaykum hamal al-at al-harb illa hin al-darūra*). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

27. Recent scholarship has illumined the composition and publication of this work far beyond what was hitherto known. See Christopher Buck and Y. A. Ioannesyan, “Baha'u'llah's Bisharat (Glad-Tidings): A Proclamation to Scholars and Statesmen,” *Baha'i Studies Review* 16 (2010): 3–28.

28. For example, those discussed in Moojan Momen, “Learning from History,” *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2, no. 2 (1990): 55–68.

29. Literally, *al-sulh al-akbar*. This distinctive Baha'i term is the companion idea to The Most Great Peace (*al-sulh al-a'zam*), which is the second stage of a process begun with the revelation of Baha'u'llah. For details on this, see Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004).

30. For the debate on the problem of whether the Bab invoked the law of *jihad*, see the series of articles and responses by Muhammad Afnan and William S. Hatcher, “Western Islamic Scholarship and Bahá'í Origins,” *Religion* 15 (1985): 29–51; Muhammad Afnan and William S. Hatcher, “Note on MacEoin's ‘Bahá'í Fundamentalism,’” *Religion* 16 (1986): 187–92; Denis MacEoin, “Baha'i Fundamentalism and the Academic Study of the Babi Movement,” *Religion* 16 (1986): 57–84; idem, “Afnan, Hatcher and an Old Bone,” *Religion* 16 (1986): 193–95.

31. One of these was the command to destroy all other books but his. See Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*. This may provide an interesting variation on the distinctive Islamic “contexts for revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) tradition. In this case, the Babi confusion would be the context for the proclamation of a more general and universal message. We may also see here a distinctive variation on what is, as far as I know, the characteristic Twelver Shi'i hermeneutic mode ascribed to certain passages of the Qur'an that might otherwise call into question the “sinlessness” (*'isma*) of the Prophet Muhammad (e.g., the passage in which he is upbraided by God for spurning a needy petitioner—“he frowned”; cf. Q 80:4–10). The operative technical formula in the *tafsir* literature is: *iyayaki a'ni wa'sma'i ya jara* [Even though I appear to be addressing you directly, this message is really for the one who is standing within earshot]. On this formula, see Todd Lawson, “Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to Tafsir,” in *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, vol. 4, *Translation and Exegesis*, ed. Colin Turner (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 163–97.

32. Buck and Ioannesyan, “Baha'u'llah's Bisharat (Glad-Tidings),” esp. 13–14.

33. But this does not mean that his exhortations are for Babis only. In subsequent writings, the same message is addressed explicitly to the peoples of the world, to the kings and rulers, to humanity as a whole.

34. The writing of this commentary is in response to a question from his guest, the young Shaykhi Mulla Husayn. For details, see Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, and Lawson, “Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. A. Rippin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 223–53.

35. Todd Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam: Qur'an, Exegesis, Messianism and The Literary Beginnings of the Babi Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

36. Muhammad-Husayni, Nasrata Allah, *Yūsuf-i Baha'* (Dundas: Mu'assasah-yi Ma'arif-i Baha'i bi-Lisan-i Farsi, 1991).

37. Charles Pellat, *hilm*, in *EI2* 3:390–92.

38. This is exemplified in the Qur'an and the Tales of the Prophets literature and is also the subject

of the most popular work by Ibn 'Arabi, the *Fusūs al-hikam*. A modern scholarly discussion of this distinctive islamicate religious orientation is Michael Zwettler's pioneering study of typological figuration in the Qur'an, "Mantic Manifesto." In brief, each prophet is spiritually present in every other prophet, but depending upon the specific details of this or that prophet's mission, various virtues will be emphasized while various others will be deemphasized.

39. Joseph as model of *hilm* has not been noticed in the excellent studies of either the qur'anic story or the post-qur'anic treatment in countless poems, tales, religious performances, and institutions. A valuable summary of this material is John Renard, "Reprise: Joseph of the Seven Doors," in *Seven Doors to Islam*, 259–72.

40. "[Mu'awiya's] was a style that involved indirect rule through the *ashraf*, supplemented by his own personal touch with delegations [*wufūd*] and, not least, by his 'ilm [q.v.], 'the patient and tireless cunning in the manipulation of men through knowledge of their interests and passions' . . . which in his case included 'the prudent mildness by which he disarmed and shamed the opposition, slowness to anger, and the most absolute self-command.' . . . In one of those semiapocryphal stories with which Arabic literature is so rich, Mu'awiya is quoted as having said, 'If there were but a single hair between myself and my people, it would never be severed. . . . I would let it go slack if ever they tugged it, and I would tug it myself if ever they slackened it.'" Martin Hinds, "Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan," in *El2* 7:263–68.

41. B-SH-R is a frequent qur'anic root. It is in the form *bashar* ("mortal and fallible) man" thirty-seven times. In a nearly equal number of passages, however, it is connected with a rather interesting semantic reversal from the somewhat gloomy connotations of *bashar*, namely "human as weak," in numerous words for joy and glad tidings; in addition to *bashīr*, they are: *bushr* (three times), *bushrā* (fifteen times), *bashshāra* (thirty-three times), *istabshāra* (eight times), *abshara* (one time).

42. *Nadhīr* is said to be the opposite of *bashīr* in A. J. Wensinck, "Nadhīr," in *First Encyclopedia of Islam, 1913–1936*, eds. M. Houtsma, A. J. Wensinck, E. Levi-Provencal, H. A. R. Gibb, and W. Hefening (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 6:806. Wensinck does not comment on the interesting juxtaposition of these two opposites as descriptive of the office of prophet, though he does remark that *nadhīr* is held by some to be a synonym for *rasūl*, "messenger." There is no article in *El2* for *bashīr*.

43. The irony expressed by this specific lexical juxtaposition has, as far as I know, not been explored. On the distinctive circular structure of sura 12, see Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'anic story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," *Muslim World* 76 (1986): 1–15. Further discussion of the distinctive spiritual function of the qur'anic Joseph is in Todd Lawson, "Typological Figuration and the Meaning of 'Spiritual' in the Qur'an: Joseph and His Story," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, forthcoming.

44. Lawson, "Typological Figuration and the Meaning of 'Spiritual.'"

45. Cf. the comparison made between this family reunion and the birds attaining the presence of the Simurgh in 'Attar's famous poem, in Todd Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam*. The idea of the "apocalypse of reunion" was raised some years ago in Todd Lawson, "Reading Reading Itself: The Surat Yusuf in Shi'i Mystical Scriptural Exegesis," *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies* 1, no. 7 (November 1997), www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol1/nahl1.htm.

46. Joseph's popularity may also be connected to his functioning as an emblem of "irenic relief" in an otherwise polemic-saturated milieu within Shi'ism.

47. *Iron in the Soul* is the title of a book by Kenneth Cragg that examines the role and model of Joseph, especially for the value it might have for coming to peaceful terms in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict: *The Iron in the Soul: Joseph and the Undoing of Violence* (London: Melisende, 2009). For example, in a recent message to the beleaguered Baha'i community of Iran, the Universal House of Justice counseled the Baha'is as follows: "The proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can tran-

scend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action.” Quoted in Michael Karlberg, “Constructive Resilience: The Bahá’í Response to Oppression,” *Peace & Change* 35, no. 2 (April 2010): 222–57, quote at 234.

48. Cf. Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip Sherrard and Liadain Sherrard (London: Kegan Paul International, 1986), 331–33.

49. A complete study of the Joseph motif throughout the Baha’i writings (including those of the Bab, ‘Abdu’l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and even the messages and decisions of the Universal House of Justice) would, I am certain, confirm the general argument of this chapter.

50. *Ay barādar-i man shakhs-i mujāhid kih irādih namūd qadam-i talab wa sulūk dar sabil-i ma’rifat-i sultān-i qidam gudhārad bāyad dar badāyat-i amr qalb ra kih mahall-i zuhūr wa burūz-i tajalli-yi asrār-i ghaybi-yi ilāhī ast az jami’-i ghubārāt-i tirih-yi ‘ulūm-i iktisābi wa ishārat-i mazāhir-i shaytānī pāk wa munazzah farmāyad.* (*Book of Certitude*, 148–49)

51. “[The Baha’is] must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islam—the source and background of their Faith—and approach reverently and with a mind purged from preconceived ideas the study of the Qur’ān.” Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow* (London: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1973), 226.

52. One exception is the reference to “rending the veils of glory” (*kashf subūhāt al-jalāl*) toward the end of the tablet. On this metaphor, which may also be translated “be aware of delusions of grandeur,” see Todd Lawson, “The Bab’s Epistle on the Spiritual Journey towards God: Provisional Translation, Commentary and Preliminary Edition of the Arabic Text of the Risalatus’suluk,” in *The Baha’i Faith and the World Religions*, ed. Moojan Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 2005), 231–47, esp. 239 and the notes. On the importance of the Mahdi to Sunni Islam, see Wilferd Madelung, “al-Mahdi,” in *EI2* 5:1230–39.

53. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 198–229. See the rich discussion of *hilm* in Pellat, q.v. *EI2* 3:390–92, who accepts Izutsu’s analysis. See also a similar conclusion in Mohammed Arkoun, “Violence,” in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, 5:432–33.

54. Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 64.

55. Quoted in Pellat, *hilm*.

56. Lawson, “Globalization and the Hidden Words.”

57. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–72), 1:301: “La piété et la spiritualité shi’ite culminant ainsi dans cette *walāyat* vouée à l’Imām, comme Forme théophanique sous laquelle l’*Absconditum* se révèle à l’homme, et sous laquelle le Dieu caché devient objet d’amour (cette Forme en étant le *mahbūbiya*). Et c’est pourquoi tout amour de Dieu, du fait qu’il postule un Dieu qui soit objet d’amour, est *walāyat* de l’Imām.”

58. Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 87–88. See also the same author’s “Notes à propos de la *walaya* imamite (aspects de l’imamologie duodécimaine, X),” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 4 (2002): 722–41.

59. Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism*, 88. Such a piety is far from Baha’i teachings and may indeed provide the foil against which these teachings began to be distinguished for their universality.

60. See Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha’i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Although the notion of modernity at work here is largely external to the Islam world, the book is important for the thoroughness with which it tracks possible external or non-Islamic factors in the rise of the Baha’i Faith. This is done to such a degree that it may be thought to ignore quite robust and distinctive native islamic resources, most notably the pervasive and powerful *wahdat dar kathrat* variety of an especially

persianate Islamic “mystical” discourse, especially because this fell heir to the *wahdat al-wujūd* “theosophy” of the exponents, preachers, and teachers of the vision of Ibn al-ʿArabi (d. 1240). The thorough examination of the relationship between Baha’i scriptures and the *wahdat al-wujūd* and/or *shuhūd* “schools” remains an especially interesting project for understanding the formation of doctrine and religious identity in the modern period. We know, for example, that there are striking similarities between the thought of the highly influential “*shuhūdi*” ‘Ala al-Dawla Simnani (d. 1336) and Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i (d. 1823), whose “Shaykhi movement” (mentioned in note 3) was the precursor of the Babi-Baha’i religions. (See Joseph Van Ess, “‘Ala’ al-Dawla Semnani,” in *Elr* 1:774–77, following Hermann Landolt, “Der Briefwechsel zwischen Kashani und Simnani über *wahdat al-wujūd*,” *Der Islam* 50 [1973]: 29–81, esp. 62–63.)