

The Validity and Value of an Historical-Critical Approach to the Revealed Works of Bahá'u'lláh

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In his seminal work *The Mirror and the Lamp* M. H. Abrams asserts that all theories of literary criticism consider four fundamental components of artistic creation: the work itself, the artist, the universe that is being imitated and the audience. Abrams then distinguishes among the various branches of literary criticism according to the dominance of one or more of these ingredients. Because theories of literary criticism come and go according to how one formulates these components in relation to interpretation, it is not uncommon for theories to arise out of a reaction against previous approaches or else to reflect the tenor of an age or a social movement. One such antithesis was the rejection on the part of some forms of objectivist criticism (particularly the so-called 'new criticism' of the mid-20th century) of some tenets of historical criticism. Since objectivist criticism views a work as creating its own universe and as having within itself the keys to meaning, it sometimes finds misleading implications inferred from the historical circumstance of a work's creation, whether these considerations be the personality of the author or the social milieu in which the work was written.

The Value of the Objectivist Approach

For the student of Bahá'í scripture, it would seem that an objectivist approach with its emphasis on a close reading of text and its attempt to discern various metaphorical and symbolic levels of meaning would clearly be the appropriate critical approach to take with the revealed work of Bahá'u'lláh, or with the revealed statements of any Manifestation, for that matter. Certainly the techniques of hermeneutics and exegesis, both of which imply perceiving levels of meaning beyond the literal, have a longstanding validity in scriptural study¹ and Bahá'u'lláh Himself virtually assures the success of such approaches in the Kitáb-i-Íqán when He cites the tradition that says, 'We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain'.² The implication here would seem to be that independent meditation on the verses will inspire the reader who will thereby begin to discover these various levels of meaning.

But there is another vindication of an objectivist approach. If we accept the Bahá'í assumption that Bahá'u'lláh is a divine emissary come to assist humankind in creating a global community, we might question the value of knowing the incidental circumstances surrounding the journey that His message took to reach us, especially since it is the essential truth of the words we are challenged to ponder, not the historical context in which they were revealed.

Such an assumption might seem further confirmed by the fact that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to reflect independently on His words, a process of meditation and study which focuses on each individual's personal and private relationship to the symbolic, allegorical or 'hidden' meanings: 'Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.'³

Still another confirmation of an objectivist critical approach to the revealed writings of Bahá'u'lláh would seem

to be the extent to which Bahá'u'lláh safeguards the process of personal interpretation. He eliminates clergy and prohibits the creation of a learned class that has the power to issue authoritative interpretation of scripture. In effect, He commands that everyone become scholars of scripture when He affirms that all individuals are capable of understanding scripture on some level and when He ordains that all pursue this task on a daily basis.⁴

Another indication that an objectivist approach would seem the most appropriate tool for studying the revealed writings of Bahá'u'lláh is the distinctive relationship between the Manifestation and His art. We might understandably infer that a human artist is susceptible to all manner of subtle historical influences—environment, heredity, personality, health and various other circumstantial forces. The Manifestation is portrayed in the Bahá'í writings, however, as pre-existent,⁵ as an other-worldly visitor come to teach us about the spiritual realm from which He has come. As such, He would seem to be impervious to circumstantial or historical influences. Unlike human artists who so often employ art to speculate about the mysteries of life or to examine subjectively the human heart, the Manifestation has exact knowledge of these realities. Likewise, while each Manifestation has a distinct set of personal circumstances, He is, the Bahá'í writings affirm, fully capable of transcending any of these.⁶ Furthermore, unlike human artists, the Manifestation has no ulterior motive, no personal agenda, no hidden desire, no psychological relationship shaping His perception. He alludes to and responds to the exigencies of His personal situation but He would not seem to be susceptible to unconscious internal or external influences given His essential nature and avowed purpose. In addition, since Bahá'u'lláh intends His words to be universally appropriate for all humanity for the next thousand years, can we not presume that His art transcends historical considerations of time and place, other than planet earth at the point of maturation?

There is yet one more related point, perhaps the most weighty of all. What do the historical circumstances of the revealed words of the Manifestation matter if the Prophet is not really the author of His own work in the first place? Every Manifestation acknowledges that nothing He does or says derives from His own authority or volition, that He subordinates His own will to the Will of God. God instructed Moses what to do and assured Him that He would provide Moses with the appropriate words: And you shall speak to him [Aaron] and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do' (Ex. 4:15).⁷ Likewise, in explaining the source and authority of His words, Christ stated, 'For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak' (Jn 12:49). Muhammad stated that He could not adapt or change the Qur'án to accommodate the desires of His followers because He was the channel through which God spoke and not the author of the words: 'It is not for me to change it as mine own soul prompteth. I follow only what is revealed to me ... (Qur'án 10:16).

In His letter to Muhammad Sháh, the Báb similarly described the process of revelation:

God beareth Me witness, I was not a man of learning, for I was trained as a merchant. In the year sixty [1844 AD] God graciously infused my soul with the conclusive evidences and weighty knowledge which characterize Him Who is the Testimony of God—may peace be upon Him—until finally in that year I proclaimed God's hidden Cause and unveiled its well-guarded Pillar, in such wise that no one could refute it.⁸

Bahá'u'lláh describes the same process of revelation:

Whenever I chose to hold My peace and be still, lo, the Voice of the Holy Spirit, standing on My right hand,

aroused Me, and the Most Great Spirit appeared before My face, and Gabriel overshadowed Me, and the Spirit of Glory stirred within My bosom, bidding Me arise and break My silence.⁹

Indeed, in the Tablet of Wisdom Bahá'u'lláh states that He is able to quote passages from books He has never had physical access to because He sees before Him the pages of works He wishes to cite:

Thou knowest full well that We perused not the books which men possess and We acquired not the learning current amongst them, and yet whenever We desire to quote the sayings of the learned and of the wise, presently there will appear before the face of thy Lord in the form of a tablet all that which hath appeared in the world and is revealed in the Holy Books and Scriptures.¹⁰

We might well wonder whether the process Bahá'u'lláh describes here alludes to some divinely arranged text retrieval system or whether this same process obtains with all the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh. In other words, does the Manifestation have any creative role to play in the rendering of the divine thought into a particular language? For example, in the concluding sentence of this same passage Bahá'u'lláh states, 'Thus do We set down in writing that which the eye perceiveth.' Perhaps He is indicating that revelation always employs this procedure whereby He sets down precisely the words He is commanded to utter.

The Role of the Manifestation in the Creative Process

There are hints in other authoritative Bahá'í writings that the Manifestation may play some role in the creative process of revelation. For example, Shoghi Effendi states that the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas 'may well be regarded as the brightest emanation of the mind of Bahá'u'lláh'.¹¹

I have heard some Bahá'ís speculate that the imperative 'Say' is a divine command after which is a direct quote from God, implying, perhaps, that the rest is not verbatim but merely inspired paraphrase.

In the long run, it does not make any substantive difference for us. Whether the revealed works are word for word from the mind of God or whether the Manifestation receives the ideas in pure form and then in His exalted and other-worldly capacity instantaneously shapes them into artistic form without revision or any other sign of normal artistic processes, the result is a process that transcends anything we understand about human artistic methods and an art form wherein there is a precision of thought, an exact fusion of form, style and image with theme. In short, the Bahá'í perspective implied in these descriptions seems to confirm the view expressed in John 1:1, that creation derives from the revealed word which is for us synonymous with God: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Nevertheless, in spite of all these implied caveats against applying the methods of historical criticism to the works of Bahá'u'lláh—one of the few Prophets to whom we can with certitude ascribe a literary style as opposed to oratorical skills—there are indications in the Bahá'í writings that historical considerations may not only be powerfully relevant to interpreting the works of Bahá'u'lláh but in some cases an historical-critical approach may be indispensable. For example, even a cursory consideration of the revealed work of Bahá'u'lláh suggests at least four levels of historical-critical information that become valid indices to interpretation of the works.

The Manifestation as Participant in History

The first level concerns the Manifestation as an integral and strategic participant in the on-going educational process, the evolution of human society on our planet. Each of the

Manifestations enters this reality with full historical consciousness, aware of what progress has been made until that moment in the education of the human body politic and aware of the precise part He has to play in the next stage of fostering of an 'ever-advancing civilization'.¹² Therefore, while to the uninformed it might seem more accurate to think of the Prophets as victims of history instead of its prime movers, the Bahá'í paradigm portrays the appearance of the Manifestations as the motive force impelling history forward, and the revealed words of the Prophets as the fundamental tool by which they exercise this influence:

Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he [man] was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded.¹³

Even though we must await future scholarship to appreciate fully the ingenuity of the teaching techniques employed by the Prophets, it is clear that divine rationale and subtle wisdom dictate historical considerations, such as the time of the advent, the sort of society in which the Prophet appears, the human conditions into which He is born, as well as the literary genres of the revealed works. In effect, all of these historical 'accidents' are not accidents at all but circumstances which ultimately propitiate the eventual success of the human educational process as a whole. For even when things seem to go badly, they do so with an ultimately benign purpose. When Bahá'u'lláh sends epistles to the kings and rulers of the earth that they might recognize His station and follow His advice, their rejection has the immediate effect of impeding the advent of the Most Great Peace, but it has the long range effect of demonstrating powerfully to humankind the persistence of God's grace in history in spite of human wilfulness and negligence.

It is in this context of the appearance of the Manifestation as part of an ongoing historical process that Bahá'u-

'lláh Himself acknowledges the constraints imposed on Him by the limitations of human capacity. For even though the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is ordained to endure inviolate for the next thousand years, and even though the advent of Bahá'u'lláh signals the maturation, the fulfilment and consummation of previous revelations, He still must restrain Himself from revealing all that is in His power to unfold. Bahá'u'lláh indicates these constraints in several places. For example, in the Hidden Words we find, 'At that moment a voice was heard from the inmost shrine: "Thus far and no farther."'14 Shoghi Effendi observes that this verse alludes to the continuity or 'progressiveness' of revelation, the relativity of each dispensation to the entire historical process of divine enlightenment:

Does not Bahá'u'lláh Himself allude to the progressiveness of Divine Revelation and to the limitations which an inscrutable Wisdom has chosen to impose upon Him? What else can this passage of the Hidden Words imply, if not that He Who revealed it disclaimed finality for the Revelation entrusted to Him by the Almighty?15

In another discussion of this same Hidden Word, Shoghi Effendi further elucidates this same theme:

In a more explicit language Bahá'u'lláh testifies to this truth in one of His Tablets revealed in Adrianople: '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.'16

Therefore, if we study the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh without regard to its relationship to the continuity of human history, we may fare little better than amnesiacs, suddenly finding ourselves in the throes of adolescence and desper-

ately trying to understand out of context the wisdom and guidance of a teacher whose every utterance alludes to past and present conditions of which we are sublimely ignorant. Or stated differently, if Bahá'u'lláh is alluded to by past Prophets as the one who will usher in the maturation of human society, we obviously need to know something about the identity and past performance of the organism that is about to become so suddenly transformed if we are to understand how to participate in the process.

The Role of Social and Religious Context in the Revelation

A second kind of validity and relevancy of an historical-critical approach to the interpretation of the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh is the fact that each Prophet explicitly relates virtually everything He does and says to the immediate social and religious context in which He appears. For while His ministry may be intended to have some degree of universal applicability, He speaks first to those who follow the previous Manifestation, because it is on the foundation established by that previous teacher that the Prophet builds His own edifice. Therefore, in the same way that virtually every utterance of Christ alludes to Judaic doctrine and scripture, stating He has not come to abolish the past but to fulfil it or build on it,¹⁷ so the primary audience for Bahá'u'lláh is most often the followers of Muhammad or the followers of the Báb, and the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh are replete with allusions to historical events and the special symbols and jargon of those religious traditions. In effect, one cannot fully understand or appreciate many of the works of Bahá'u'lláh without at least a fundamental appreciation of the meaning of these allusions. To recover these allusions requires an historical knowledge of both religions.

For example, Bahá'u'lláh's most important doctrinal work, the Kitáb-i-Íqán, alludes throughout to explicit verses

from the Qur'án while responding to the questions put to Him by an unconverted uncle of the Báb who was seeking proof of the Báb's station as the promised Qá'im of Islam.¹⁸ Likewise, the beginning structure of the work as it discusses progressive revelation and the successive rejection of the Prophets parallels strikingly Muhammad's discussion of the same theme in the Súrih of Húd. And in the concluding passages of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, His Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh speaks powerfully and directly to the 'people of the Bayán',¹⁹ cautioning them not to make this Cause a 'plaything for your idle fancies'²⁰ and reminding them that the Bayán itself was 'sent down' through the Báb 'for no other purpose than to celebrate My praise, did ye but know!'²¹

This introduces a profoundly important issue for the scholar of religious history: the understandable assumption, at least on the part of some scholars, that these similarities are causally related and that the Bahá'í religion is, effectively, an offshoot of or reaction against Islam or the Bahá'í Faith. From a Bahá'í historical-critical perspective, this would seem to be a *post hoc* fallacy proceeding directly from the failure to recognize the true motive force and dynamic nature of human history, progressive and persistent divine intervention. For example, in various footnote commentaries to his translation of the Qur'án, J. M. Rodwell makes judgements about Muhammad's veracity based on his assumption that Muhammad is not what He claims to be—a divine emissary whose words are inspired by or received from the spiritual world. Consequently, when Muhammad's account of the story of Joseph differs from the biblical account (by being more complete), Rodwell repeats an accusation that Muhammad engaged in 'wilful dissimulation and deceit'²² so that He can claim 'inspiration' as the source of this knowledge. Likewise, since Muhammad claims to have been illiterate but recites the story of Joseph, Rodwell assumes that 'Muhammad must have been in confidential intercourse with learned Jews'.²³ In the same vein, Rodwell assumes that Muhammad's familiarity with biblical history

indicates that while He ‘wished to appear ignorant in order to raise the elegance of the Koran into a miracle’,²⁴ the eloquence itself demonstrates the contrary.

In short, strict scholarship for those who are not Bahá’ís may imply the refusal to accept one of the most fundamental verities of the Bahá’í Faith: that history is a divinely guided process the logic and causality of which cannot be accurately understood without regard for the spiritual impetus operating as logically, as consistently and as predictably as any other scientific principle.²⁵ It is in consideration of this essential relationship that Bahá’í scholar Adib Taherzadeh asserts,

There is no way by which a scholar, however unbiased and objective he is, can write a true version of the history of the life of Bahá’u’lláh, or submit an authentic appreciation of His mission, unless he be a believer in His Faith ... The art of writing any history lies not merely in describing events, but in relating them to each other and putting them into their proper context. And in religious history the Revelation itself is obviously central—it cannot be left out.²⁶

However, while the relationship between the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh and the social and religious context in which it appears does not imply circumstantial influence, as we might presume with a human artist, it most certainly does imply relevancy and continuity.²⁷ Therefore, while the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is not a sect or offshoot of Islam, it consciously responds to an Islamic social and religious perspective as the soil out of which the new revelation must take root and grow. And it is precisely in this context that Shoghi Effendi emphasizes the importance of studying the religious history that forms the context for Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry. In *The Advent of Divine Justice* Shoghi Effendi states that Bahá’ís must study Islam if they are to grasp fully the ‘source and background of their Faith’²⁸ and if they are to be capable of becoming stalwart teachers of their beliefs:

They 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’án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá’í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God. They must devote special attention to the investigation of those institutions and circumstances that are directly connected with the origin and birth of their Faith, with the station claimed by its Forerunner, and with the laws revealed by its Author.²⁹

Of particular importance to this second level of relevancy of historical criticism is the fact that Bahá’u’lláh, though beginning His revelation in 1852, did not reveal His station as ‘Him Whom God will make manifest’ until ten years later. By waiting, He thus fulfils the request of the Báb that the Manifestation ‘grant a respite of nineteen years as a token of Thy favour so that those who have embraced this Cause may be graciously rewarded by Thee’.³⁰ The obvious rationale for this delay relates to the avowed purpose of the Bábí dispensation to prepare for the advent of Bahá’u’lláh, but the early execution of the Báb and the Bahá’í leadership (except for Bahá’u’lláh) made it imperative that the purposes of the Báb’s ministry be fulfilled by Bahá’u’lláh Himself. Otherwise, there would be no way Bahá’u’lláh could demonstrate effectively how His own ministry was fulfilling and consummating the teachings the Báb’s revealed work provided as the beginning point in a new cycle of religious history.³¹ Therefore, a good part of Bahá’u’lláh’s energy during the ten years in Baghdad was focused on transcribing the writings of the Báb and in teaching them to the Bábís, and many of His revealed writings during this period reflect this purpose.

The Diversity and Coherence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation

A third and even narrower focus of an historical-critical study in relation to interpreting the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh relates to the organic nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Ministry. While exhibiting an incredible array of styles, points of view, genres and tonalities, the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh function as integral parts of one coherent statement. In this sense no individual work can be fully appreciated by itself but must be viewed as one surface of a multifaceted jewel, almost as acts in a play, or cantos in a vast and intricate poem.

While any decent assessment of this integrality will warrant and require lengthy future studies, we can mention a few obvious ingredients in one sort of progression among these works. For example, the Hidden Words is an appropriate beginning to the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh because it summarizes in autonomous lyric verses the essential spiritual verities of all past revelations;³² whereas the Kitáb-i-Íqán revealed a few years later advances human knowledge of theology and theodicy in a highly structured treatise in which Bahá'u'lláh enunciates the essential doctrinal principles of the Bahá'í revelation.

After He laid a foundation of new knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh announced His station to His followers and then to the world at large in a series of epistles to the world's religious and political leaders. In 1873 Bahá'u'lláh revealed the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as the foundation of the laws and institutions that would express in social laws and institutions the spiritual reality of a global commonwealth. Afterwards a series of Tablets explicating these laws followed. Finally, at the end of His ministry, Bahá'u'lláh revealed Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, a retrospective and summary of His revealed work. In it Bahá'u'lláh sometimes alludes to the circumstances surrounding the revelation of particular works, elucidates the predominant themes of some works, and asserts with unmistakably clarity the purity of His motives

and His total rejection of ulterior temporal motives. The work is also effectively His leave-taking, though He also bequeathed other important documents, such as the Lawh-i-Karmil (Tablet of Carmel) and the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd (Book of the Covenant) which anticipate and direct the transfer of authority after the Prophet’s death.

This brief summary of one possible pattern is hardly adequate to hint at the scope or structure of the vast canon of Bahá’u’lláh’s revealed works, or the variety of approaches one might utilize in studying the organic unity of the revelation. But perhaps this brief analysis can demonstrate how there is a logic and integrity between the revealed works and the historical context in which they were produced. That rationale may be manifest in the order of unfolding themes, or it may be observed in the manner in which works respond to the exigencies of certain events. But in the same way that it is sometimes unwise or misleading to make inferences from individual statements of Bahá’u’lláh taken out of context, so it is misleading, or at least inadequate, to assess the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh by studying a single work, or to interpret a single work without regard to the particular part it plays in the totality of the revelation.

The Role of Historical Context in Understanding Topical Allusions

A fourth and even narrower application of an historical-critical approach to the revealed work of Bahá’u’lláh concerns the use of topical allusions so essential to individual works. For example, it is extremely important to know that the Seven Valleys responds to questions posed by a student of Sufism and even more imperative to understand that it employs the style, jargon, form and imagery typical of a mystical treatise. It is similarly helpful to know that the Kitáb-i-Íqán is a highly structured doctrinal essay, an apologia explicating the concept of progressive revelation

and the station and nature of the Manifestations. Likewise, it may prove beneficial to approach Epistle to the Son of the Wolf as a retrospective of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry addressed by Him to an inveterate enemy of the Bahá'í religion. We may understand something of what is being said in these works without such information, but with it we are significantly ahead in our attempt at meaningful interpretation.

But in some Tablets understanding of the topical allusions is not merely helpful, it is essential. The Tablet of the Holy Mariner, for example, is extremely abstruse and allusive. We may have some sense of the tropes, of the work as an allegorical portrayal of the appearance of the Manifestation. He is the mariner, guiding the ship of His Cause to save the faithful from the treacherous seas of confusion and doubt. But when we uncover some of the historical allusions, we gain an entirely new sense of what the work is intended to demonstrate. For example, Shoghi Effendi observes that because of the historical circumstances of its revelation, the believers present when it was revealed knew immediately what the Tablet meant:

It was on the fifth of Naw-Rúz (1863), while Bahá'u'lláh was celebrating that festival in the Mazra'iy-i-Vashshásh, in the outskirts of Baghdád, and had just revealed the "Tablet of the Holy Mariner", whose gloomy prognostications had aroused the grave apprehensions of His Companions, that an emissary of Námiq Páshá arrived and delivered into His hands a communication requesting an interview between Him and the governor.³³

At this time the Bahá'í community (still known as the Bábí community) was experiencing relative tranquillity. Bahá'u'lláh had transcribed the writings of the Báb and had organized the formerly chaotic and confused Bábís into an exemplary community of noble repute and character. Bahá'u'lláh had even won the affection of the governor of

Baghdad, and Bahá'u'lláh's reputation had spread abroad so that sages and clerics of every sort travelled vast distances to visit the Most Holy House. The Guardian goes on to note, however, that 'during the last years of His sojourn in Baghdád', Bahá'u'lláh alluded to a 'period of trial and turmoil that was inexorably approaching, exhibiting a sadness and heaviness of heart which greatly perturbed those around Him'.³⁴ When Mírzá Áqá Ján chanted the Tablet of the Holy Mariner to the assembled believers, they knew that the dreaded period of trial was imminent, that the poetic imagery in the work alluded to their own circumstance, and they were seized with consternation.

The Example of the Tablet of Ahmad

A somewhat more subtle example of how historical criticism informs the revealed works individually is the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad (Lawh-i-Ahmad).³⁵ On the surface the work does not seem terribly inaccessible. There is some exquisite imagery but the Tablet does not contain the thickly veiled figurative images and complex narrative of the Tablet of the Holy Mariner. Bahá'u'lláh refers to Himself with familiar epithets: He is 'the Nightingale of Paradise' that 'singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity'.³⁶ But at least two central allusions are a bit more troublesome: Who was Ahmad that Bahá'u'lláh would make him the central figure in a Tablet that promises such distinctive rewards and why does Bahá'u'lláh exhort Ahmad to demonstrate fidelity by being obedient to the Báb? 'Say: O people be obedient to the ordinances of God, which have been enjoined in the Bayán by the Glorious, the Wise One. Verily He is the King of the Messengers and His Book is the Mother Book did ye but know.'³⁷ After all, when the Tablet was revealed in 1865 Bahá'u'lláh had already disclosed His station to the Bahá'í community and was in the process of announcing it to the rest of the world in a series of epistles. Furthermore, if the Tablet is written for this one individual in a

very particular situation, why are contemporary Bahá'ís assured by Bahá'u'lláh that God will dispel the sadness, solve the difficulties and remove the afflictions of anyone who will 'read this Tablet with absolute sincerity'? Of course, one might argue that no mortal human being can do anything with absolute sincerity, so we need not worry about how God would respond since His assistance is conditioned on an impossible occurrence.

It is at this point that the Bahá'í scholar of history becomes an invaluable resource in helping us uncover these allusions, or at least to gather resources for speculation. In the second volume of *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* Adib Taherzadeh discusses the life of Ahmad in great detail.³⁸ For example, we discover that Ahmad's life spans most of the major events of Bahá'í history from the early search for the Qá'im by figures such as Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kázim to the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá after the death of Bahá'u'lláh. More importantly, Ahmad's life serves to exemplify the qualities of a true seeker and devoted believer.

Born into a 'rich and influential family in Yazd',³⁹ Ahmad was attracted to mysticism early in his life. He eventually became so enthralled with a mystic search for the promised Qá'im that he left home at age 16 (c. 1826) to escape the orthodoxy of his Muslim parents. He searched in India where he conversed with mystics, studied the ascetic, life, imposed upon himself a 'rigorous self discipline',⁴⁰ but in time became discouraged and returned to Persia, where he settled in Káshán, married and worked as a weaver.

Upon hearing about the Báb, Ahmad searched for someone who could tell him more, and in Mashhad met Mullá Sádiq. He became a Bábí and was instructed to return to Káshán, to resume his work, and to teach only when he found a hearing ear. In 1845, when the Báb was conducted to Tehran through Káshán, Ahmad was privileged to meet Him. Soon afterwards, the persecutions increased and

Ahmad was forced to hide to protect his life and in time had to leave the city.

By 1858 the Báb had been executed and Bahá'u'lláh had organized the Bábí community in Baghdad, so Ahmad travelled to Baghdad to attain the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. In 1863 Bahá'u'lláh was forced to leave Baghdad and Ahmad may have been one of those believers privileged to meet with Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridván,⁴¹ though he stayed behind in Baghdad, as Bahá'u'lláh had bidden him to do, where he served the Cause with great devotion. But in time he so longed to attain again the presence of Bahá'u'lláh again that he set out for Adrianople. When he arrived in Constantinople, he received the Tablet of Ahmad from Bahá'u'lláh. Upon reading it, Ahmad immediately understood that his duty was not to bask in the physical presence of his beloved. Surrendering his own will and desires, he promptly journeyed to Persia where he passed the remainder of his long life teaching the Bábís that the promised one, 'Him Whom God will make manifest', had appeared in the person of Bahá'u'lláh.

The historical allusion to Ahmad in this weighty Tablet would thus seem to be an intentional device on the part of Bahá'u'lláh to teach the reader those qualities that might be capable of ensuring a similar sort of certitude and conviction. Stated another way, while the Tablet might be variously interpreted, its overriding theme is clear—to be firm in the Covenant, a 'flame of fire to My enemies and a river of life eternal to My loved ones, and be not of those who doubt'.⁴² And yet implicit in this Tablet are emphatic allusions to the character of Ahmad himself, who, with the help of the scholar of history, now looms for us as an emblem of fidelity, steadfastness and obedience, not content to luxuriate in physical proximity to Bahá'u'lláh, but choosing instead to labour in the vineyard.

Ahmad's response is also quite possibly a key to Bahá'u'lláh's enigmatic statement that the Báb was 'the true One from God, to Whose commands we are all conforming'.⁴³

Throughout the Bayán, the principal ordinance of the Báb to His followers, indeed the abiding theme of His entire ministry, is to recognize and follow ‘Him Whom God will make manifest’. In fact, He states: ‘At the time of the appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest, wert thou to perform thy deeds for the sake of the Point of the Bayán, they would be regarded as performed for one other than God, inasmuch as on that Day the Point of the Bayán is none other than Him Whom God shall make manifest ...’⁴⁴ Logically, therefore, to follow the commands of the Báb is, at the time of the revelation of the Tablet of Ahmad in 1865, to follow Bahá’u’lláh. Ahmad obviously inferred from the Tablet that, having been so favoured as to have recognized ‘Him Whom God shall make manifest’, he should now become a ‘river of life eternal’ to the loved ones—those who had already taken the first step in recognizing the Báb—by bestowing upon them the opportunity to take the second step by discovering the one prophesied by the Báb: ‘I received the Tablet of “The Nightingale of Paradise” and reading it again and again, I found out that my Beloved desired me to go and teach His Cause. Therefore I preferred obedience to visiting Him.’⁴⁵ The merit of Ahmad’s response is confirmed by the fact that at this time in Persia the Bábí community was in such a state of deprivation and perversity that sometimes the Bábís showed hostility towards Bahá’í. teachers.⁴⁶

If one is to recite the Tablet of Ahmad with ‘absolute sincerity’, therefore, one would do well to understand its meaning, or at least the meaning it had for Ahmad. For while one might well argue that anyone can pray the Tablet with the sincere conviction that the mere recitation of its words will bring about the promised result, it is also clear that the overall purpose of the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is to induce increased knowledge coupled with an ever more expansive expression of sincere conviction into a spiritually transformed society. The enigmatic historical allusions in the Tablet may well be the clue Bahá’u’lláh gives the reader

to help unlock the implicit theme of devotion and obedience contained in the work.

If this be true, to recite the Tablet of Ahmad with ‘absolute’ sincerity is to respond as Ahmad did—first to understand the indirect imperative veiled in the allusion, then to express that understanding in action by teaching the waiting souls—most especially the ‘loved ones’ of God who patiently await God’s Prophet—the knowledge of the advent of the Manifestation.

Conclusion

From this brief look at the various levels of employing historical criticism, we can see how our attempt to interpret Bahá’í scripture can benefit from the tools that scholarship provides. In fact, we might well conclude that any study of Bahá’í scripture would do well to consider how a particular work relates to the historical context in which it appears. For while Bahá’u’lláh as artist may not have been precisely conditioned by historical events, He consciously spoke in an historical context and integrated His ideas into the fabric of history, all of which He considered to be a religious history.

In the final analysis, of course, there can be no reliable formula for interpreting the revealed works of Bahá’u’lláh, but we can infer from the examples mentioned above that the tools of historical criticism—as well as those of other branches of literary analysis—can offer useful and valid assistance for the average reader as well as for the scholar, because Bahá’í scripture appears in an astounding variety of literary styles. In effect, Bahá’u’lláh has offered humanity a variety of avenues through which one can achieve insight, a diversity analogous, perhaps, to the symbolic nine portals of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár*, whereby all humanity, regardless of background, may gain admittance to the new revelation.

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Notes

1. In medieval exegesis, four 'senses of interpretation' were employed that attempted to codify the ascending strata of meaning into 1) the literal, 2) the allegorical, 3) the moral or tropological and 4) the anagogical. Thus in Christian scriptural exegesis, Jerusalem is literally a city, allegorically the Christian Church, morally the believing soul and anagogically the heavenly City of God.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 255.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 182.
4. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá'u'lláh states, 'Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all. Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 149).
5. Shoghi Effendi explained, 'The soul or spirit of the individual comes into being with the conception of his physical body.

'The Prophets, unlike us, are pre-existent. The Soul of Christ existed in the spiritual world before His birth in this world. We cannot imagine what that world is like, so words are inadequate to picture His state of being.

'We cannot know God directly, but only through His Prophets. We can pray to Him, realizing that through His Prophets we know Him, or we can address our prayer in thought to Bahá'u'lláh, not as God but as the Door to our knowing God' (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 9 October 1947, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1699).

6. Bahá'u'lláh observes, for example, that He is a prisoner because He has consented to such treatment: 'The Ancient

Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness. This is of the mercy of your Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 45, p. 99).

7. All Bible passages are given in the Revised Standard Version.
8. The Báb, *Selections*, p. 12.
9. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 102.
10. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 149.
11. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 213.
12. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 109, p. 215.
13. Lawki-i-Maqsúd, in *ibid.* no. 122, pp. 259-60.
14. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian no. 77.
15. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 59.
16. *ibid.* p. 116.
17. In Matthew 5:17 Christ states, 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.'
18. Shoghi Effendi calls the *Kitáb-i-Badí'* an 'apologia, written to refute the accusations levelled against Him by Mírzá Mihdíy-i-Rashtí, corresponding to the Kitáb-i-Íqán, revealed in defence of the Bábí Revelation' (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 172). However, the Kitáb-i-Íqán is not limited to that task. Before vindicating the Báb as Qá'im (and, towards the end, Himself as Mustagháth), Bahá'u'lláh renders an exacting exegesis of the verses in Matthew 24:29-31 which allude to the advent of Muhammad to demonstrate the symbolic or poetic nature of prophetic language. In effect, before Bahá'u'lláh can prove to the Muslims that the Báb fulfils their own scripture and prophecies, He first shows them how their own Prophet (Muhammad) fulfils Christian scripture and prophecies.
19. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 176. After the 'Most Great Separation' in Adrianople (see *God Passes By*, pp. 169-71 and Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2, p. 170),

- Bahá'u'lláh refers to those who continued to follow the Báb, or more particularly who chose to follow Mírzá Yahyá, as the 'people of the Bayán'.
20. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 178.
 21. *ibid.* para. 179.
 22. Rodwell, trans. *Qur'án*, p. 239.
 23. *ibid.* p. 230.
 24. *ibid.* p. 308.
 25. I use the word scientific here because as a law operant in and governing the effects of the phenomenal world, the principle of divine intervention implicit in the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation is in every sense a scientific principle.
 26. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, pp. 239–40. Taherzadeh goes on to state, 'The Founders of religions receive their teachings through divine revelation, an experience which man can never have. This makes it beyond scientific enquiry' (*ibid.* p. 240). I do not agree with this assertion. There are many experiences which man cannot have but which can still be discussed in terms of scientific enquiry, and I think the process of revelation, because it is logically devised, can to some degree be understood as a process even if it cannot be duplicated by human beings.
 27. It is in this vein that Shoghi Effendi in translating Nabil's *Dawn-Breakers* finds it necessary to include in the introduction to that work a discussion of the conditions in Persia in the middle of the 19th century as well as a discussion of the 'Distinguishing Features of Shí'ah Islam'.
 28. Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 49.
 29. *ibid.*
 30. The Báb, *Selections*, p. 7.
 31. This is one explanation for the appellation 'Primal Point' given the Báb, who functions to link together the prophetic cycle with the Bahá'í era.
 32. Bahá'u'lláh states, 'This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God,

may fulfil in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, prologue). I refer to this as an anthology of individual lyrics partly because Shoghi Effendi states, "The Hidden Words have no sequence. They are jewel-like thoughts cast out of the mind of the Manifestation of God to admonish and counsel men ..." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 October 1949, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1633). Of course, one can discover the continuity of various themes being played out.

33. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 147.

34. *ibid.* According to the second volume of Nabil's narrative, Bahá'u'lláh shared with the believers a dream that alluded to these difficulties:

A dream which He had at that time, the ominous character of which could not be mistaken, served to confirm the fears and misgivings that had assailed His companions. 'I saw,' He wrote in a Tablet, 'the Prophets and the Messengers gather and seat themselves around Me, moaning, weeping and loudly lamenting. Amazed, I inquired of them the reason, whereupon their lamentation and weeping waxed greater, and they said unto me: "We weep for Thee, O Most Great Mystery, O Tabernacle of Immortality!" They wept with such a weeping that I too wept with them. Thereupon the Concurrence on high addressed Me saying: "... Erelong shalt Thou behold with Thine own eyes what no Prophet hath beheld ... Be patient, be patient." ... They continued addressing Me the whole night until the approach of dawn' (*ibid.*).

35. This is not to be confused with the Persian Tablet of the same name which was revealed for Hájí Mírzá Ahmad of Káshán. For a fuller discussion of historical criticism in relation to the Tablet of Ahmad, see Hatcher, *Ocean of His Words*, pp. 340–78.

36. Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 210. The Nightingale image seems an appropriate metaphorical epithet for the Manifestation who calls to humankind while humanity is asleep in the midst of the darkness or decline of the previous dispensation. The 'Tree', often the Lote Tree or

the Sadratu'l-Muntahá, might signify the succession of Prophets.

37. *ibid.* p. 211.
38. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2, ch. 5.
39. *ibid.* p. 107.
40. *ibid.* p. 109.
41. While there is no list of those who visited Bahá'u'lláh in the garden, Ahmad himself states that at the time of Bahá'u'lláh's departure for Constantinople, 'all of us were together in the Garden' (*ibid.* vol. 2, p. 112), implying that he was present during the 12 days of that memorable series of meetings.
42. Bahá'u'lláh in *Bahá'í Prayers* (American 1982 edition), p. 212.
43. *ibid.* p. 211.
44. The Báb, *Selections*, p. 95.
45. A. Q. Faizi, *Bahá'í News*, March-April 1967.
46. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2, p. 114.