



stop-over. In winter of late 1863, Bahá'u'lláh settled in the Muradiyyah Quarter of Edirne, first in a small house, then in a larger one opposite the Mawlavi sufi center. He lived in the Muradiyyah quarter for about six months (circa mid-December 1863 through mid-June 1864). He then moved to the house of Amru'llah north of the great mosque of Sultan Selim. It is impossible to date with complete certainty the Tablets or letters Bahá'u'lláh wrote back to Iran announcing his mission publicly, but my best guess is that they date to around winter, late 1865 and early 1866. They certainly precede, and in fact helped provoke the discord between Bahá'u'lláh and Subh-i Azal that led to charges against the latter that he attempted to poison Bahá'u'lláh or have him murdered. In the wake of these events, Bahá'u'lláh broke up the house of Amru'llah and moved on 10 March 1866 to the house of Riza Bey.[1] It seems necessary then, that the Tablet of the Companions be dated no later than Winter of 1866, and more likely late 1865.

The explicitness of the Surah of the Companions about Bahá'u'lláh's station distinguished it from earlier proclamatory tablets. A work in which no explicit claim appears to have been made was the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad Yazdi, dated by Taherzadeh as 1282 (27 May 1865-15 May 1866). Although Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the "news" (naba'), which we may now understand as his own advent, and although he refers to himself with lofty adjectives, the tablet could have been read as a Babi prayer. Bahá'u'lláh affirms the truth of the Bab, and includes himself among those "obedient" to him (wa inna kullun li amrihi la-min al-`amilin), urges the Babis to follow the laws of the Bayan, which he calls the "Mother Book," and extolls the Bab as the "king of messengers" (sultan ar-rusul). At the end of the tablet (in a passage not translated in the official English rendering) Bahá'u'lláh sends greetings on those among the inhabitants of the `City of God' (Baghdad) who had "believed in God and in Him, Whom God shall send forth on the Day of Resurrection." The use of the imperfect tense (yab`athuhu allahu) would seem to indicate that the advent had not yet occurred as of that writing. Although the Tablet of Ahmad makes Bahá'u'lláh sound more as though he were claiming to be the vicar of the Bab than a new Manifestation, these formal ambiguities appear not to have prevented Ahmad Yazdi from understanding that Bahá'u'lláh was making a messianic claim, at least according to the memoirs he recorded as an old man. The tablet actually reached him after he had already left Baghdad and come to Istanbul, and the Babis in Istanbul were well-informed as to the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's claims, which would have provided a social context in the which the tablet was read less ambiguously as an assertion that he was He whom God shall make manifest. Certainly, he says that is the message he took in 1865-66 to Azerbaijan, Tehran and Khurasan.[2] It may be that Bahá'u'lláh carefully crafted some early tablets so that a contextless reading of them by Babis not in the know would not raise a controversy. I bring all this up to indicate the difficulties that the hermeneutics of Bahá'u'lláh's contextless tablets of any period face. In fact, the whole subject of how texts are read by their audience, and how authors employ ambiguity, which European historians have investigated at length, needs extensive investigation in the context of Islamic and Iranian

culture, and obviously has implications for the study of the Babi and Bahá'í movements.[3]

Among the most important tablets of this period was the Tablet of the Companions.[4] Adib Taherzadeh has usefully pulled together the available basic texts dealing with the reception of the Surat al-ashab back in Iran. It was written for Aqa Munib (or Munir) Kashani (d. 1868). Kashani, from a prominent merchant family of Kashan, was nearly killed by his father for becoming a Babi, but instead he expelled him from the household. Kashani went to Baghdad, and in 1858-59 Bahá'u'lláh sent him as a courier to Tehran, Qazvin and Tabriz, to which he carried missives from Bahá'u'lláh and Azal. While still in Baghdad, Aqa Munib was informed by Bahá'u'lláh of his claims (during Ridvan?), and accepted them. Kashani accompanied Bahá'u'lláh to Istanbul in 1863, holding a lamp before his howdah at times. Bahá'u'lláh sent him back to Iran from Istanbul some time between August and November, 1863. My own conclusion is that it was in the winter-spring of 1865-66 that Bahá'u'lláh sent Aqa Munib Kashani the Tablet of the Companions. Kashani was then in Tehran, and Samandar says he was the first to make known Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that he was He whom God shall make manifest in that city. From there he took or sent the surah to Qazvin, where it provoked immediate tumult, according to Kazim Samandar, an eye-witness (who is named in the surah, though apparently by another name ["Ali?"]).[5] Sayyid Mihdi Dahaji, a companion of Bahá'u'lláh who lived in Baghdad from 1856, and stayed on there after Bahá'u'lláh left in 1863, wrote that he first heard in 1283 that he heard that Bahá'u'lláh had openly declared himself (izhar-i zuhur farmudih and).[6] The Islamic year 1283 straddled 1866 and 1867. Since news took time to travel, our dating of the Surah of the Companions therefore seems plausible.

Mirza Haydar `Ali Isfahani was also in Tehran when Kashani received the Surah of the Companions:

In Tihran I again met Jinab-i Munir [Munib]. Since he knew of my convictions and my love for the Ancient Beauty, he showed me a Table called the Suriy-i-Ashab, which had been revealed in his honor by Bahá'u'lláh. As I read this Tablet, I felt in every verse a fire of enthusiasm, and I could not control my feelings. So I turned to Jinab-i-Munir and asked him whether Siyyid Muhammad had deceived Azal, or Azal had deceived Siyyid Muhammad, or whether the two of them had simply joined together in rebellion against Bahá'u'lláh. When Jinab-i-Munir heard these words he embraced me and kissed me [on the mouth] and said, "The enemies of Bahá'u'lláh are united in one thing alone, and that is to join forces against him.[7]

Isfahani's account makes it clear that he read the Surah of the Companions as an open declaration that Bahá'u'lláh was He whom God shall make manifest, the promised one of the Babis.

Many of the phrasings in the Surah of the Companions resemble those of the Surah of Blood. In the Surah of Blood, written for Nabil-i A`zam Zarandi, Bahá'u'lláh makes explicit that he held back his secret for many years: "O

people, I bolted up the gates of paradise for twenty years, lest anything issue from My lips that might cause the fire of hatred to blaze forth in your breasts . . . O people, I verily am `Ali [the Bab], and this is but another Return after the first." [8] Here, Bahá'u'lláh is speaking with the voice of the Bab, whose return he asserted to the Babis he was, and the reference to "twenty years" clearly refers to the period between 1260 and 1280. However, this appears to be a reference to the Ridwan declaration (late 1279).

The Surah of the companions confirms that Aqa Munib Kashani had prior knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that he was the Babi promised one: "you became acquainted in the course of your travels with what no one else in all the worlds was informed." Bahá'u'lláh singles him out as the only "man of insight" who accompanied him on his trip to Istanbul, which provides supporting evidence to the idea that most of those Babis Bahá'u'lláh took with him were persons, such as Muhammad `Ali Salmani, who he feared would get up to some mischief if left alone in Baghdad. That Bahá'u'lláh did not bring with him more trusted and cultured companions, however, constituted a loss to historians, since the Salmani type produced inadequate memoirs of the period. We find Bahá'u'lláh castigating partisans of Azal for clinging "to the same arguments as did the people of the Qur'an in the past."

Bahá'u'lláh's early kerygma, as represented in this surah, consisted in the assertion that no one could claim to believe in the Bab (or earlier prophets) who rejected Bahá'u'lláh, since Bahá'u'lláh was 1) the Return of the Bab and 2) the proofs he put forth for his station resembled those of the previous prophets. He likens the Babis who reject him to the Muslims who rejected the Bab, saying "This is, in truth, he whom you have sought from the beginning that hath no beginning. This is the visage toward which all faces turned" and "By God, He who appeared in the year 60 is manifest once more." He at one point declares, "O people of the Bayan, `Ali (the Bab) hath appeared in a new mantle. In truth, he was named Husayn in the realm of names, and Baha' in the kingdom of eternity, and in the domain of the Unknowable Essence he was given this name." The reference to the name Husayn can double as a prosaic one (Bahá'u'lláh was Husayn `Ali Nuri), and as an allusion to his claim of Husayniyyah, being the return of the Imam Husayn. Bahá'u'lláh further adverts to his mystical experience in the Siyah-Chal, his "intimation" of future greatness, when he says, "People, in truth I am that `good' you were promised in the year Nine." The 'year nine' had been designated by some Shaykhis as the time for the advent, and it coincided with nine years after the Bab's declaration, a time when Bahá'u'lláh was in the shah's dungeon and received his first revelations. In what is probably a reference to Bahá'u'lláh's writings in the period 1853-1863, which spoke highly of Azal and deferred to him as Babi leader, he wrote, "O people, see not discrepancies between the verses we have revealed, for these have all descended from one strong in power, from the realm of immortality, and differ according to various stations." Bahá'u'lláh's identification with the Bab may have made it easier to insist that the laws of the Bayan remained in force at this point "He revealed to you divine laws and standards . . . beware lest you differ concerning it." A

similar commitment to the laws of the Bayan is present in the 1865 Tablet of Ahmad Yazdi. Finally, Bahá'u'lláh here for the first time defended his having kept a `messianic secret,' writing, "Whenever we have, at one time, concealed this Cause from you, and at another revealed it to you, this has been a mercy from us upon you, and upon all the worlds. For some of the people are weak and feeble, such that they would be unable to witness the light of the sun by reason of the infirmity in their eyes." The gradualism in Bahá'u'lláh's self-revelation is explained by the need to prepare his audience over time for the shock of the declaration.

Bahá'u'lláh instructs Kashani to tell others of his declaration only with extreme caution. He does, however, suggest persons whom Kashani ought to approach, by addressing them in the letter. Several of these had met Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad, but had not formed any particular allegiance to him, such as "Rahim," who had written to Bahá'u'lláh from Tehran, or "Zaman," to whom Bahá'u'lláh had earlier sent letters containing hints of his station. ("Servant, read what we revealed to you aforetime, and smell in its ink the fragrance of musk from the tresses of the divine Beloved.") It seems clear that Bahá'u'lláh is capitalizing on a network of acquaintance and correspondence, hoping to mobilize these Babis into a loyalty to him. One of those addressed, Ibn Nabil, appears to be from a family that adopted Babism and then reverted to Islam, and Bahá'u'lláh now reaches out to regain such fallen-away Babis for his cause. The new believers in Bahá'u'lláh are instructed to bear all persecution patiently (for now it would come, not only from Muslims, but from partisans of Azal, as well).

The Surah of the Companions contains some striking images and metaphors, and an explicit declaration of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. It is not, however, a doctrinal statement. Rather, it is an intensely personal, pastoral letter intended to cultivate personal ties of loyalty. So that the nature of the document can be appreciated, I offer a provisional translation of the Surah of the Companions below. The text is that published in Volume 4 of *Athar-i qalam-i a`la* (pp. 205-239). I compared this text to an MS in the hand of Zaynu'l-Muqarrabin kindly provided by the Bahá'í World Center, and found no variant readings.

#### Notes

[1] H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh, the King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980), pp. 217-231.

[2] Ahmad Yazdi, "Memoirs recorded by the Local Spiritual Assembly of `Ishqabad," summarized and partially quoted in `Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari, *Muhadarat* (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 130 B.E./1973), p. 659. See also Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, 4 vols. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1974-1987), 2:107-136.

[3] Leo Strauss, *Writing and the Art of Persecution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1952]); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and*

Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Roger Chartier, Cultural History: between practices and representations (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

[4] Bahá'u'lláh, Athar-i qalam-i a`la, vol. 4 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, B.E. 125/1968), pp. 205-239.

[5] Kazim Samandar, Tarikh-i Samandar va Mulhaqat (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 131 B.E./1974), p. 228; Taherzadeh, Revelation, 2:65-106.

[6] Sayyid Mihdi Dahaji, "Risalih," University Library Cambridge, Browne Collection, Or. F. 57; for this point see p. 34.

[7] Mirza Haydar `Ali Isfahani, Bahjat as-Sudur (Bombay 1913), p. 51; trans. A.Q. Faizi, Stories from the Delight of Hearts (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1980), p. 14.

[8] Bahá'u'lláh, "Surat ad-dam," Athar, 4:7.

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