

the large house in the Muradiyyah quarter, staying there till around July of 1864.

By August, 1864, Bahá'u'lláh and his entourage had rented a mansion, called the house of Amru'llah, near the Sultan Selim mosque at the center of the city. It had thirty inner, private rooms on three storeys. The public portion of the house had four or five reception salons, as well as many bedrooms. Bahá'u'lláh and his family lived on the upper floor of the private half of the house. Many of the Babis occupied the middle floor of the outer, public portion. Nearby, one smaller house was found for Azal and his family, and another for Mirza Musa and his. The Babis living in the public section of the house began working in the bazaar as traders, peddlars, shopkeepers, and artisans. Among the many inhabitants of the house were two strong partisans of Azal, Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani and Mirza Ahmad Kashani.

These Babis lived relatively peacefully together at the house of Amru'llah for one year, until about August of 1865, by which time Bahá'u'lláh's claims to be the return of the Bab and the promised one of his religion had become widely and publicly known, and been greeted positively by many Babis back in Iran. Azal, of course, considered himself the appointed vicar of the Bab, and was angry about Bahá'u'lláh's claims. Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani also seems to have been jealous of them, and despite the ways in which he had occasionally humiliated Azal, he chose to back and to use the latter. Thus, in the period August 1865 through February 1866 the Babi community split definitively into two factions, one supporting Azal and the other supporting Bahá'u'lláh. These seven months were called by Bahá'u'lláh the 'Days of Stress' (ayyam-i shidad). The increasingly tense and rancorous relations between the two groups were exacerbated by their close living quarters in the house of Amru'llah and by the culture of the bazaar, where most of them were employed, and wherein faction fighting of a physical sort was common.

Two major incidents led to the Most Great Separation. First, Azal attempted to poison Bahá'u'lláh, and although the attempt failed, it left Bahá'u'lláh ill for a month and caused a trembling in his hands for the rest of his life. Second, the barber Muhammad-`Ali Salmani reports that Azal attempted to recruit him to murder Bahá'u'lláh in his bath. Azal, who had been involved in plots to assassinate Nasiru'd-Din Shah, and who had in Baghdad called for the assassination of a rival (Dayyan) for leadership of the Babis, had a violent streak that makes these accusations credible.

In reaction to all these intrigues, Bahá'u'lláh chose to break up the Amru'llah household, where Bahá'ís and Azalis had been attempting to live together. He moved to a different quarter, to the house of Riza Bey, on 10 March 1866. After he made provisions for the housing there of his own family and partisans, he went into seclusion for two months, refusing to see anyone. Bahá'u'lláh's loyal brother, Mirza Musa, said of Bahá'u'lláh's withdrawal from the house of Amru'llah and his subsequent seclusion, "That day witnessed a most great commotion. All the companions lamented in their separation from the Blessed Beauty."

Note that Bahá'u'lláh opens the Surah of God by saying that he desires to leave his house because of oppression. He had not desired to leave his house in Baghdad, but had rather been commanded to come to Istanbul by the sultan. It was the withdrawal from the house of Amru'llah that was voluntary and came as a result of the oppression of Azal and his partisans. Later in the tablet, Bahá'u'lláh says, "We heard with Our own ears what the ear of no contingent being hath heard. It issued from behind the walls, from those who lived in Our House, next to that Sacred Spot around which circle the denizens of paradise." This passage, too, is consistent with the situation in February-March 1866. It was in Edirne that supporters of Azal would have been living in the large house of Amru'llah with Bahá'u'lláh, plotting behind thin walls and affording the latter an opportunity to overhear them.

Bahá'u'lláh says that he concealed the plot he had overheard, so that Azal's associates had no idea they had been found out. At the time of his writing, Bahá'u'lláh is still deeply hurt, saying, "The matter continued into these very days, when the sacred Beauty desireth to veil Himself from the society of others and to sever Himself from all." We know that Bahá'u'lláh did, indeed, become highly reclusive for two months, March-May of 1866, on moving to the house of Riza Bey. Although he subsequently became more accessible, he appears to have thereafter remained a very private person. No such period of withdrawal from association with the Babis is recorded in the spring of 1863, however. Rather, we know that he associated with Babis and with the local Iraqi populace quite freely in that period.

Bahá'u'lláh's assertions in this tablet, that whoever does not believe in him has effectively denied the previous prophets, as well, and that the Babis had "turned away from the primal Beauty in His subsequent form," are both consistent with his diction in the Edirne period, after he had already made his claim in writing to be the return of the Bab. His identification of himself with Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Bab recalls his rhetorical strategy in the Edirne-period Surah of Blood. His insistence that he continued to uphold the revealed law of the Bab ("Have I altered even one of the ordinances that were revealed in the Tablets of God . . .?") resembles the sentiments in the 1865 Tablet of Ahmad Yazdi, wherein Bahá'u'lláh urges the Babis to obey the laws of the Bab. I do not regard the open claims of prophethood as likely to have been made by him in writing in Baghdad, and it is such claims that would raise the question of possible revisions of Babi law. (Bahá'u'lláh did, of course, eventually reveal his own book of laws, in 1873, but in the Edirne period he kept the Bayan in force, on the whole.)

A content and stylistic analysis of the Surah of God, then, suggests that it was revealed some time after spring, 1866, in the wake of Bahá'u'lláh's withdrawal to the house of Riza Bey in Edirne. By dating it in this way, we resolve an anomaly, the very explicit and evolved claims in the Surah of God, so unlike anything else in the Baghdad tablets. Looking at it in this manner also increases its historical importance. If the conversation Bahá'u'lláh overheard was in the house of Amru'llah, we can conclude with fair certainty

that these remarks concern a plot against Bahá'u'lláh being hatched by followers of Azal. This intriguing against him in his own house appears to have been a third impetus, along with Azal's attempted poisoning and attempt to hire Salmani as a hit man, for Bahá'u'lláh to break up the Amru'llah household and move out. After all, Azal did not live at the house of Amru'llah, although he lived nearby and increasingly constituted a menace. Rather, it was the prospect of actually dwelling with individuals (Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani and Mirza Ahmad Kashani?) who meant to do him harm that impelled Bahá'u'lláh to withdraw.

A final puzzle comes in this short tablet's final paragraph. Bahá'u'lláh wrote,

know thou that the reason for My withdrawal was not what We have enumerated for you in this luminous Tablet. Rather, We had found Ourselves to be a chief in the land and a guardian of this people, but then abandoned this position to such as desired and would accept it. Since there was no such person among the people, and distress, terror and murder were abroad in the land, We manifested Ourselves between the heavens and the earth, and dawned forth from the axis of the horizon with perspicuous sovereignty. Then, when We observed that the land was tranquil, We secluded Ourselves and gave it unto the care of another people.

To what events is he here referring? Their identification is important internal evidence for the dating of this tablet, but the wording is ambiguous. The passage could be read as referring to the early Baghdad period, when Bahá'u'lláh withdrew in 1854-56 to Sulaymaniyyah in Kurdistan, and perhaps Ishraq-Khavari and others interpreted it in this manner. On the other hand, it could equally well refer to the withdrawal of March-May 1866 within the house of Riza Bey. Whereas Bahá'u'lláh could plausibly be seen to have achieved the status of a 'chief' and 'guardian' of the Babis in the Istanbul and early Edirne periods, this seems an odd description of his position a decade earlier in Baghdad, when he had just arrived after a stint in the shah's dungeon. Bahá'u'lláh may have kept in the background once the Babis arrived in Edirne, but saw the community deteriorate. He appears to have taken on a firmer leadership role when they moved to the house of Amru'llah in summer, 1864, and to have insisted that the Babis in that house go find employment. At the same time, he pressed his claims to be the promised one of the Bab. Once, however, he had established that claim and attracted a cohort of devoted, courageous followers, such as Nabil-i A`zam, Aqa Munib Kashani, Ahmad Yazdi, and others, he felt justified in going into seclusion in the spring of 1866. The situation after March, 1866, remains most consistent with the events referred to in this tablet, and there is nothing in the tablet that cannot be plausibly explained in this context. On the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh's desire to leave his house, his overhearing of a plot against him by persons living in his house, his references to having already declared his station, and the unusual openness with which he refers to that station, are all hard to reconcile with the tablet having been written in March or April of 1863.

The sense of betrayal here is poignant, as is the determination to withdraw

from human society as a result of this persecution. In this mood, Bahá'u'lláh very powerfully evoked his sympathy for the poor and the oppressed, saying that "a subordinate is more exalted than a myriad of his superiors, and one oppressed is more excellent than a city full of tyrants." Bahá'u'lláh's option for the downtrodden, here expressed so eloquently, still speaks powerfully to a late-twentieth-century world in which human rights are too often a mere dream and the tyrannical oppression of minorities all too common.

Translation

The Surah of God (Surat Allah)

by Bahá'u'lláh

This is the Surah of God that hath been revealed in truth from the divine realm of the Hallowed, the Glorious, the Illumined One.

He is the Powerful.

O Muhammad-`Ali, hearken to this proclamation from thy Lord, at a time when He desireth to depart out from among ye by reason of what the hands of the oppressors have wrought. Thereby have sorrows encompassed the entire creation in such wise that the Pen is hindered from mentioning the mysteries, the Tablet from giving its written testimony, the clouds of grace from raining down and the trees of paradise from bearing fruit, if ye be of them that know. Say: O people, ye are so wrapped in dense veils that ye expel God from His House and yet make mention of His names at morn and eventide.

Say: Blinded be the eyes that open every morning and yet shall never fall upon My glorious and refulgent Beauty, deaf be the ears that hear every sound but neglect to hearken to My wondrous and sweet melodies, and dumb be the tongue that shall never move with My Name, the All-Subduing, the Omnipotent, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. Contemplate within thyself My calamities, and that which hath befallen Me. By God, they have afflicted no one else before Me, and they shall never be borne by the heavens and the earth. Matters have come to such a pass for Me on every side that I have resigned Myself to that which no one in all the worlds will accept for himself. Say: O People of the Bayan, have I forbidden you what God allowed you, or have I enjoined upon you what God proscribed? Have I altered even one of the ordinances that were revealed in the Tablets of God, the Almighty, the Glorious, the Generous? If My sin be the divine verses that are revealed to Me, this was not from Me, but rather from the All-Powerful, the All-Beautiful. By God, I am not the first to perpetrate this crime, rather, most of the Prophets committed it, including `Ali-Muhammad (The Bab), and, before Him, Muhammad the Apostle of God, Christ, and Moses. Each spoke forth that with which the Strong Spirit inspired Him from the kingdom of God, the Protector, the Omnipotent.

By God, the creation hath never seen My like and no eye hath beheld My peer, for I am Powerful to do what I will, and I am the Pardoner, the Compassionate. Whoso denieth My Cause hath repudiated all the Messengers, and whoso turneth away from My face hath shunned the Countenance of God. To this bear witness the

essences of all contingent beings, and the tongues of all existing things, then this Tongue, the All-Knowing, the All-Perceiving. Say: O People of the Bayan, We lived among you as one of you, but you were not pleased thereby. For this reason did We draw some of the seventy thousand veils from the face of this Cause, but this also gladdened you not. We lifted some more of the veils, until affairs came to the pass where this lofty and inaccessible station stood revealed. Should ye never be pleased therewith, We shall, in spite of you, continue to lift the veils with a power and sovereignty that derive from Us, O assemblage of the hateful. This hath ever been the practice of the Messengers and the character of the Sincere Ones, if ye but knew.

Since ye have turned away from the primal Beauty in His subsequent form, repudiated His verses, and disbelieved in His bounty, therefore doth He depart alone out from among you at a time when He is detached from all who are in the heavens and on earth. My deeds bear witness thereto, if ye be of the fair-minded. Say: Verily, We have turned Our face toward Him that created the heavens and the Throne, and I shall never ask for a helper other than God, the Glorious, the All-Praised. O people, know that My succorer is My heart and my fortress is My trust in God. My confidant is My beauty, My troops are My mention and My party is the concourse of the worlds. By God, when We discovered the people adoring the graven images of their delusions and vain imaginations instead of God, We visited upon them thereby a retribution for their deeds, that they might thus be led to perceive that a new people had come into being.

Therefore, be just within thyself. Is it seemly that those who turn their faces toward utter nothingness should make mention of the eternal Beauty? Nay, by My Self, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Therefore hath God cleansed the hem of His robe from the filth of any mention by the wicked, and hath purified it from all names and attributes, in private and in public. The people, however, neglected to take note, and remain heedless. O `Ali, close thine eyes to the like of these, and turn they gaze away from all who are in the heavens and on earth. Then remind the people of that with which the Spirit inspireth thee at all times. If thou cleanseth thy soul from this world and from those in whom thou perceivest the odor of unbelief, thou wilt find that thou hast attained that station whereunto the hearts of the Near Ones shall never soar. Thou wilt discover that thou art more learned than all those endued with perfect and sagacious knowledge. Therefore, rend the veils in My Name, the Chosen, and pay no heed to the impudent. Quaff the waters of the river of paradise that are reserved for the righteous, from this gleaming and radiant chalice, and stand in trepidation of no one. Put thy trust in My Name, the Forgiving, the Glorious, the Munificent. Abandon the world to those who seek it, and depart from the prison of earthly hopes. Content thyself with My love, for, verily it is better than the treasures of the heavens and the earth, and more excellent than all that was and is yet to be. This is My command to thee, and My counsel to the people of sanctity. Through the power of the All-Merciful, shun the serpent that hideth within its heart a hatred for the All-Bountiful, and turn away from it, though it recite for thee all that hath been revealed in the Holy Scriptures and though it cling to glorious and articulate Tablets.

O`Ali, We heard with Our own ears what the ear of no contingent being hath heard. It issued from behind the walls, from those who lived in Our House and dwelt in the precincts of that Sacred Spot around which circle the denizens of paradise, and the people of the holy veils, then the angels that render praise to God. Nevertheless, We concealed this matter in such wise that they privately imagined God to be heedless of them. Say: How wretched is what ye have imagined! Verily, He knoweth what is invisible in the heavens and on earth, and He is, in truth, Omniscient. Thus was I tormented while I was among those persons and dwelt behind them. At My back was the murky gloom of rancor, and at My right hand were the somber depths of malevolence, and God standeth witness to what I say. The matter continued into these very days, when the sacred Beauty desireth to deny Himself the silk brocade of human friendship and to sever Himself from all, male and female, young and old, save from those women toward whom God hath laid upon Me responsibilities. Verily, there is no God but Him, the Possessor of the world of creation and the kingdom of the Cause, and all is with Him upon a Preserved Tablet.

Know, however, that the reason for My withdrawal was not what We have enumerated for thee in this luminous Tablet. Rather, We had found Ourselves to be a chief in the land and a guardian of this people, but then abandoned this position to such as desired and would accept it. There was no such person among the people, and distress, terror and murder were abroad in the land. We therefore manifested Ourselves between the heavens and the earth, and dawned forth from the axis of the horizon with perspicuous sovereignty. Then, when We observed that the land was tranquil, We secluded Ourselves and gave it into the care of another people. For, by My Life, a subject is better than a thousand rulers, a subordinate is more exalted than a myriad of superiors, and one oppressed is more excellent than a city full of tyrants. Emulate thy Beloved therein and sever thyself from all things. Issue from behind the curtains of silence and speak forth with the truth in wondrous and precious melodies. Then soar into the realm of detachment with the wings of the Sanctified, the Exalted, the Soaring, the Benevolent, the All-High.

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