

Tablet of the Sacred Night: Introduction

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see translation

While it is customary for Bahá'ís to have community gatherings on the evening of May 22 to celebrate the declaration of the Bab, it is clear that another complex of individual and group means of celebrating that day was encouraged by Bahá'u'lláh.

Surprisingly, these practices are especially associated with Bahá'í Sufis or dervishes

(daravish, `urafa'), and involve prayers specifically revealed for this occasion and

the custom of staying up most of the night of the 22nd, praying and chanting remembrances (dhikr) of God.

`Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari tells us in his survey of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets, *Ganj-i Shayigan* (Tehran: BPT, 124 B.E.), pp. 209-210, that the "Tablets of the Sacred Night (*Alwah Laylat al-Quds*)" were revealed in `Akka by Bahá'u'lláh with

the intention that Bahá'í dervishes or Sufis should treat that night as a festival and

read these Tablets.

In his encyclopaedic work, *Rahiq-i Makhtum*, 2 vols. (Tehran: BPT,), 2:296, Ishraq-Khavari identifies the "Sacred Night" as none other than the night of

the Bab's declaration (bi`that), and reaffirms that Bahá'u'lláh said it was good to

stay up that night.

Of the Tablets of the Sacred Night, only one has, to my knowledge, been printed, (Bahá'u'lláh, "*Lawh Laylat al-Quds*," in A.H. Ishraq-Khavari, ed., *Risalih-*

'i Tasbih va Tahlil [New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982], pp. 174-181).

The

affinities of this short Tablet (which is really an extended supplication to God) with

Sufi thought and practice, are evident. The first paragraph refers to the sufferings

of the prophets, evoking the Egyptian Sufi mystic `Umar Ibn al-Farid's "Poem of the Way," which likewise details the tribulations of God's messengers. Human beings are characterized as "poor," the word the Sufis humbly used to describe themselves. Attaining nearness (*qurb*) to God and even the divine Presence (*liqa'*)

are mentioned as goals, and the language here is shared between Sufism and Babism.

The Sufi practice of staying up late praying is referred to when Bahá'u'lláh

says, "I beseech Thee to look, O my Beloved, with Thy generous gaze, upon these persons, who are sleepless during this Night that Thou hast designated a festival for Thy creatures, wherein Thou shonest forth by Thy Name, the All-Merciful, upon the entire contingent world, and wherein the Beauty of Thy Divinity mounted the Throne of Forgiveness." In Sufism, such ceremonies were held on the "Laylat al-Qadr," the Night of Power upon which Muhammad was believed to have received the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel. Bahá'u'lláh has moved such observances to the equivalent night in the Babi-Bahá'í religion, the "Laylat al-Quds" or Night of Holiness, when the Bab is believed to have revealed himself to Mulla Husayn Bushru'i.

The mystical path in Sufism is characterized by a strong emotional component in worship. Bahá'u'lláh evokes this aspect of that path when he calls upon God to "endue their yearning with ardent passion." Another goal of Sufism is to attain a mystical knowledge (*irfan*) of God. Bahá'u'lláh in the beginning of the Most Holy Book makes attainment of such mystical knowledge of God one of two prerequisites for salvation. In the Tablet of the Sacred Night, however, he reminds the Sufis that God singled out His Messengers for the mystical knowledge (*irfan*) of His Self, a reference to the Bahá'í doctrine that the Manifestation of God stands in the place of the Self of God in the lower realms of being. Sufis lay stress on achieving a powerful understanding of God's Unity (*tawhid*), which is, again, a repeated theme of this Tablet. Moreover, they employ sometimes scandalous metaphors for the spiritual drunkenness they seek, and Bahá'u'lláh here also evokes these literary themes when he says, "Yes, my Beloved: give them to drink of the cup of life from the hand of this Youth in this garden," representing himself as the wine-server or "saqi." He speaks of the supererogatory worship of the Sufis, urging that they "may make mention of Thee at eventide and sunrise," though such practices are also urged of all Bahá'ís in the Most Holy Book. Sufis tended to seek to focus all their concentration upon God, finding Him in all things and using breathing and other meditation techniques to heighten

their awareness of the divine. These practices are probably alluded to in the phrases, "that they might not speak save with love for Thee nor draw a breath save with devotion to Thee nor turn their faces toward any direction save the realm of Thy compassion and generosity, nor raise their hands save toward the heaven of Thy glory and nobility, nor open their eyes save to the marvels of the effulgence of the lights of Thy joy." Continual awareness of God, in every word one speaks, in every breath one takes, in every sight one sees, is an aspiration of mystics in many traditions, not only Sufis but also the Greek hesychasts, for instance. Finally, Bahá'u'lláh refers toward the end of this Tablet to the Bahá'í ideals of unity, asking God to remove from the Bahá'í mystics gathered on the Sacred Night every vestige of "contention" (ikhtilaf). Their words, he says, should be such as to guide others to the court of God's love. The mystics in their devotions should become "as one soul." This mystical unity of worshippers mirrors the divine Oneness (tawhid), reflecting in the sublunar realm an attribute of God Himself.

In the translation I offer below of this Tablet, I have presented it visually as a prose poem or psalm, which I think comes closer to conveying the lyrical quality and resort to rhymed prose that characterizes much of it, and underlines that this is a text meant to be chanted.

Abdu'l-Bahá mentions a similar but distinct custom in Memorials of the Faithful (Wilmette: BPT, 1971), pp. 36-38, in his biography of Darvish Sidq-`Ali, the Bahá'í Sufi and companion of Bahá'u'lláh.

While in the barracks, Bahá'u'lláh set apart a special night and He dedicated it to Darvish Sidq-`Ali. He wrote that every year on that night the dervishes should bedeck a meeting place, which should be in a flower garden, and gather there to make mention of God. He went on to say that "dervish" does not denote those persons who wander about, spending their nights and days in fighting and folly; rather, He said, the term designates those who are completely severed from all but God, who cleave to His laws, are firm in His Faith, loyal to His Covenant, and constant in worship (p. 38).

The date of this commemoration according to Fadil Mazandarani, Amr va Khalq is

2 Rajab of the Muslim calendar.

The nineteenth century Iranian Bahá'í community was divided into orders, as was Qajar society as a whole. There were Bahá'ís of high civil rank associated with the government, as officials and even provincial governors, known as the *nawkar* class. There were Bahá'í `ulama or Learned, who had a seminary training and often continued to wear the robes and turban of the clergy. There were Bahá'í tujjar or great merchants, Bahá'í artisans, and Bahá'í peasants. Among these orders were the Bahá'í `urafa' or mystics. These included eminent believers such as Darvish Sidq-`Ali, Ahmad Yazdi (the recipient of the Tablet of Ahmad), and Mishkin-Qalam (a member of the Ni`matu'llahi Sufi order). The Tablets of the Sacred Night and the practice of staying up that night and chanting prayers appear to have concerned this order in particular, though obviously they were available to all Bahá'ís. Mystics in the Middle East were known for performing extra acts of worship, such as "nawafil" or additional obligatory prayers beyond the five, and the late-night observance of the Declaration of the Bab appears to fall into this category of supererogatory acts of worship. These customs, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh, appear to have ceased in the twentieth century Iranian community, but it is unclear upon what basis. Certainly, if Bahá'u'lláh ordained them, they cannot be abrogated. Ishraq-Khavari in Ganj, cited above, says that the practice of staying up all night to chant the Tablet of the Sacred Night on the anniversary of the Declaration of the Bab was "discontinued." He does not, however, say who discontinued it or by what authority. Sociologically, one could point to the decline of an order-based society and the rise of a class society in Pahlavi Iran, such that statuses like Bahá'í learned and mystics ceased to exist as separate categories with distinctive customs and dress. Sufism itself declined in the Middle East as an organized movement, though some groups, such as the upper-class Ni`matu'llahis, remained as a vigorous minority. The process in the 1920s and 1930s whereby Shoghi Effendi attempted to wean Bahá'ís away from dual membership in other religious bodies led to the end of any membership by

Bahá'ís in Sufi orders. Nor do there appear to have been any special-interest societies with a mystical tendency within the Bahá'í community, though individuals with a strong orientation toward `Attar, Rumi, and Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys* and other mystical works continued to exist. (Such a special-interest society could in principle be formed.) There is to my knowledge no bar to Bahá'ís informally gathering together to stay up late the night of 22 May in order to say this and other prayers.

— Tablet of the Sacred Night: Introduction (Used by permission of the curator)