

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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LA REVUE DES ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES/LA REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BAHÁ'ÍES

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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community ([www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org)) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit [bahaistudies.ca/publications/submission-guidelines/](http://bahaistudies.ca/publications/submission-guidelines/).

## ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is “divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men.” The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is “to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, “abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith” (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the “Glory of God”—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured 40 years of imprisonment, torture and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His oldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

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# From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

This year, the worldwide Bahá'í community—as well as those in wider society who are learning, with the Bahá'ís, something of His station—commemorates the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In this commemoration, we contemplate with gratitude those of His gifts to us that we are able to recognize, and acknowledge all pertaining to Him that we cannot understand. In each of the titles bestowed, by the unerring pen of Bahá'u'lláh, upon a Figure “mysterious in His essence, unique in His station, astoundingly potent in both the charm and strength of His character” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*), we catch a glimpse—an impression—a reflection of an immeasurable light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is, in His Father's words, “this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness”, “the Limb of the Law of God,” “the most great Favour unto you,” and “the Trust of God amongst you, His charge within you, His manifestation unto you and His appearance among his favoured servants” (Suriy-i-Ghusn, in *Days of Remembrance*). In addition to these and other titles, awesome and mysterious, we reflect on those stations of the Master, no less inestimable in their import, that directly inform the very pattern of life Bahá'ís are attempting to build. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was, in the words of His

grandson who was perhaps alone in appreciating their full significance, “the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, [...] the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*).

'Abdu'l-Bahá is the authorized Interpreter of His Father's Revelation, along with the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, whom He appointed to the same role. They alone are the unerring cartographers of the Ocean of the Word, whose perfect maps will guide humanity's exploration of it throughout this dispensation.

The appointment through the chain of the Covenant of two Authorized Interpreters, and their conferred infallibility in that role, is one of the characteristic gifts of God to humanity in this age. Like so many of these gifts, its full value escapes us; we have no scales worthy to weigh it. One facet of this gift that merits reflection is the freedom it has bestowed upon each of us—each member of the human race—in our own excursions into that great Ocean.

We might begin this reflection by considering that in our search for knowledge about reality, we read from two books. One is the physical creation that surrounds us: “[e]very created being [...] revealeth His signs.” This is the “book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a most great book” (Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*).

The other is the book of Revelation.

In this age, we are all to be readers, exploring both books in accordance with our capacity and interest. Bahá'u'lláh invites us each to read the book of creation:

Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder. (Lawh-i-Hikmat, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*)

And His invitation to explore the book of Revelation is familiar to many Bahá'ís:

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. (*Gleanings*)

He has even commanded us to regularly interact with the Word—"Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)—while clarifying that it is the spirit with which this reading is approached, and not its quantity, that matters:

The prime requisite is the eagerness and love of sanctified

souls to read the Word of God.

To read one verse, or even one word, in a spirit of joy and radiance, is preferable to the perusal of many Books. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

However, in many of our cultural backgrounds, which continue to shape our world and our minds today, the reading of either book—that of creation or of Revelation—is *not* presented as a universal experience, open to all. Each book has had, and still has, its priest-hoods, those who would distinguish between the initiate and the unqualified and say that only the chosen few can read, while the rest must simply listen. And of course, there are those voices that denigrate the very importance of one, or of both, books, and tell us that there is no knowledge to be had there in the first place.

This is in stark contrast to the Bahá'í understanding, in which

[a]ccess to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. (The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván 2010* letter to the Bahá'ís of the World)

Thus, the generation and application of knowledge is the right of all of humanity. With respect to knowledge

gained from the book of existence, this right can be actualized by broadening the scientific enterprise, and making it accessible to all, not only in its technological fruits but in its very process.

As to the book of Revelation, this right to access, and responsibility to generate, knowledge is unlocked by at least two fundamental principles in the Bahá'í Faith: the abolition of the clergy, and the appointment of authorized interpreters. Thanks to the former, all can study—indeed, are enjoined to study—the Revealed Word. Thanks to the latter, all are free from the burden of thinking that either their own, or someone else's, interpretation is perfect, final, and binding.

Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions. (From a letter dated 3 January 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

As the common inheritance of all of humanity, the Writings invite us each to delve into them, to study and reflect on them alone and in community, and

to generously share what we find, ever ready to adapt our understanding to accommodate the insights of others when we find them valuable. And just as the broadening of the scientific enterprise to in some measure include all people in no way detracts from the unique capacity and contributions of highly trained professional scientists, our individual and collective study of the Word of God does not lessen our appreciation for the learned contributions of scholars of the Writings.

In that spirit, we present two exegetical works in this issue of the *Journal*. Exegesis, the attempt to explain or interpret a (typically religious) text, is a venerable field, having played an important part in articulating understandings of sacred books within many religious traditions over time. It has a distinguished history in the Bahá'í Faith. The Central Figures themselves used commentary on, and explanation of, the verses, surahs, and traditions of prior Dispensations as a mode of Revelation. The efforts of individual believers in this field, taking the Bahá'í Writings as their object of study, have yielded insights that have advanced the understanding of the community—as the works of Dr. Dávudí, some of which are published in translation in this issue, attest. Exegesis is a critical study—not in the sense in which criticism is most often used today, but in the sense of an application of human judgment, using tools and approaches developed and refined over time, to the task of uncovering more of what the text may mean. As a scholarly endeavour,

exegesis strives to be systematic, but as it takes for its object of study the Word, it can never be exhaustive. Exegetical work can uncover a little more of the path; the path itself points ever to the unreachable horizon.

The two works published in this issue demonstrate the discipline, rigour, and learning that are required in exegetical contributions to Bahá'í scholarship. At the same time, as we read these works, we can see that the beginning of Bahá'í exegesis is found in the activity that—in short or long bouts, in writing or in silent meditation—each of us is invited to do, and promised that we can do, with no more qualification than a pure heart and a desire to understand: individual engagement with the Word of God. Viewed from that perspective, the work of these authors is not only a contribution to scholarship in its own right, but also an invitation to each of us to engage with the verses they explore and consider the insights they have presented. They have brought up some pearls for us to appreciate—not only for their own great value, but as an encouragement to each of us to learn to dive, and dive ever deeper, into the Ocean.

In translating a collection of essays by Dr. 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí on theology, Dr. Vargha Bolodo-Taefi helps to build a bridge between Persian and English language Bahá'í scholarship. The importance of such a bridge, and of Dávúdí's scholarship in particular, can be estimated from Bolodo-Taefi's introduction, in which he explains the importance of the life and work of a

luminary of the Iranian Bahá'í community to a western audience as yet largely unfamiliar with him. In the essays themselves, Dávúdí draws on a wide range of Writings touching on the questions of the nature of God and of the Manifestation, and Their relationship to Each Other and to ourselves. These questions invite the scholar to correlate statements across the breadth of the Revelation, in order to carefully keep each in context. As Shoghi Effendi writes, “[o]ne might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.” (5 July 1949 to an individual believer, qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations*)

Many of the quotations with which Dávúdí weaves his thesis are translated provisionally into English for the first time here.

Dr. Amrollah Hemmat's exploration of *The Four Valleys*, one of Bahá'u'lláh's most famous mystical texts, also takes a correlative approach. Hemmat enriches our reading of the text by showing how the concepts it addresses resonate across the Revelation and in the works of its authorized interpreters. The light shed by this broader context illuminates facets of meaning that might otherwise remain obscure, particularly given the allusive nature of mystical writing. While Hemmat thus draws from a *breadth* of Writings, this is also a disciplined exploration of the *depths* of a single work. As we follow the author into these waters, our excitement about the insights uncovered

is matched by our wonder at the unlimited scope for further exploration.

It may be helpful, as you read this issue of the *Journal*, to reflect on the coherence of the exegetical study of the Word itself with the role of Bahá'í scholarship in contributing to the discourses of society. This involvement in discourse, featured at the 2021 Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies is, along with community-building and social action, one of the “three simultaneous, overlapping, and coherent areas of action” Bahá'ís are called to by the Universal House of Justice (27 April 2017 to an individual believer). Those familiar with the pattern of community building that the global Bahá'í community has embarked upon will know that study—along with action, reflection and consultation—is an integral part of that endeavour. The importance of study of the Writings and guidance to our contribution to discourses should likewise be self-evident. Indeed, these are reciprocal. The study of the Word on its own terms reveals insights. These insights are brought to bear in our contribution to discourses, with the ever-present humility that stems from understanding the implications of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi's infallible interpretation for our own efforts to understand. In turn, our real-world experience in participating in discourses (and in community building and social action) acts as a light revealing new depths in the Word; we look at it with fresh eyes.

It is the hope of the Editorial Committee that this issue of the *Journal* will

inspire each of us to further immerse ourselves in the Ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's words.

We are also very pleased to present two poems by award-winning poet Mark Jarman. Jarman is the author of numerous books of essays and poetry including *Questions for Ecclesiastes* (1997), which won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Son of a Christian minister, his poems work their way from doubt to belief, from “the nothingness that surrounds us” to an understanding that God plays a vital role in contemporary life.

The images included in these pages are by veteran photographer Rudy Umans, whose creative use of techniques and perspectives manages to convey, even in black and white, nature as an expression of God's Will.

Adorning the cover of this issue is Margaret Bremner's “Catch a Falling Star,” which, with that precious capacity of art to allude to the ineffable, may evoke a spiritual journey, the rain of the grace of God descending on the wayfarer in the valley.



# Multnomah Falls

RUDY UMANS

## You might also like to read...

As a service to our readers, we are including the URLs to articles related to the subjects presented in this issue. These are articles that have been previously published in the *Journal* and are available for free on our website.

### INTERPRETATION AS REVELATION: THE QUR'ÁN COMMENTARY OF THE BÁB

by *Todd Lawson*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-2.4.2\(1990\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-2.4.2(1990))

This article attempts to describe and place in context two of the earliest writings of the Báb. Both writings are commentaries on the Qur'án. Apart from pointing out the dramatic differences in style and content between these two commentaries, the article offers some observations on the nature of these contents, the history of the ideas put forth, and their relationship to Shí'í Islam and the thought of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í and Siyyid Kázim Rashtí.

### BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S SEVEN VALLEYS AND DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY: TOWARD A CONCEPTION OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

by *Andrew R. Hatala*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-21.1-4.2\(2011\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-21.1-4.2(2011))

Previous research outlines the processes of human development with significant detail, including biological, cognitive, and spiritual domains. In contemporary developmental discourse, however,

Bahá'í perspectives on spiritual development are virtually nonexistent. In the Seven Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh offers many insights regarding the dynamics of spiritual development.

### WILL, KNOWLEDGE, AND LOVE AS EXPLAINED IN BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S FOUR VALLEYS

by *Julio Savi*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-6.1.2\(1994\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-6.1.2(1994))

An exploration of some of the seemingly abstruse concepts expounded by Bahá'u'lláh in "The Four Valleys." The first three Valleys are described as three aspects of the spiritual path to be trod by any human being, so that he/she may acquire knowledge of God, as realization of the self, through the use of his/her capacities of willing, knowing, and loving respectively. The fourth Valley is interpreted as describing the lofty and unattainable condition of the Manifestations of God, and as such, as offering a hint of the glory of the goal of perfection towards which human beings should strive, albeit assured that such a perfection will never be theirs.

## Onset

MARK JARMAN

Where did your love for them come from?  
Where did they come from themselves?  
The party goes on while you wash up  
and their conversation dissolves.

Perhaps memory's turned hard of hearing.  
That's a way to think of it, sure.  
In the impervious chatter  
they say frankly there is no cure.

You may catch it, then you'll forget it,  
but not the important things,  
your spouse, your children, their lovers,  
the happiness each of them brings.

When you are with them keep smiling.  
So far the impairment is mild.  
Or so you've been told in all candor.  
Yes, so you've been told.

# Reflections on *The Four Valleys* of Bahá'u'lláh

AMROLLAH HEMMAT

## *Abstract*

*The Four Valleys* was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad in a mystical language and style, in response to a request made by a prominent Sufi. As such, the text employs traditional Sufi concepts, language, and symbolism, and studies of *The Four Valleys* often address this context. However, when the text is studied with a focus on a different context—the totality of the Bahá'í Writings—it becomes evident that its main purpose is to guide spiritual wayfarers to the recognition of the Manifestation of God—Bahá'u'lláh Himself, as revealed after the composition of this work. Furthermore, when the two paradigms discernable in the text—four parallel paths towards God and the four stages of a single path—are seen as complementary to each other, new insights into humankind's nature and capacities are revealed. Such a reading can point to practices that help the wayfarer to maintain a balance between various human capabilities and potentials while attempting to acquire the full range of human perfections, as prescribed in the Bahá'í Writings.

## *Résumé*

*Les Quatre Vallées* ont été révélées par Bahá'u'lláh, à Bagdad, dans un langage et un style mystiques, en réponse à une demande formulée par un soufi éminent. De ce fait, le texte utilise des concepts,

un langage et une symbolique soufis traditionnels, et les études portant sur *Les Quatre Vallées* sont souvent réalisées dans ce contexte. Cependant, lorsqu'on étudie cette œuvre dans un contexte différent – l'ensemble des écrits bahá'ís – il devient évident que son objectif principal est de guider le voyageur spirituel vers la reconnaissance de la Manifestation de Dieu, soit Bahá'u'lláh lui-même, telle qu'elle a été révélée après la composition de cet ouvrage. De plus, lorsque les deux paradigmes que l'on peut discerner dans le texte – quatre chemins parallèles vers Dieu et les quatre étapes d'un seul chemin – sont perçus comme complémentaires l'un de l'autre, on constate toute l'étendue de la vision de l'œuvre quant à la nature et aux capacités de l'humanité. Le lecteur est ainsi guidé vers des pratiques de vie holistiques qui lui permettent de maintenir un équilibre entre les diverses capacités et potentialités humaines tout en essayant d'acquérir la gamme complète des perfections humaines, comme le prescrivent les écrits bahá'ís.

## *Resumen*

*Los Cuatro Valles* fue revelado por Bahá'u'lláh en Bagdad en un lenguaje y estilo místico, como respuesta a una petición que le hizo un Sufí prominente. Como tal, el texto emplea conceptos lenguaje y simbolismo Sufí tradicional, y los estudios de *Los Cuatro Valles* seguido abordan ese contexto. Sin embargo, cuando se estudia con un enfoque en un contexto diferente – la totalidad de los Escritos Bahá'ís – se vuelve evidente que su propósito principal es guiar a los caminantes espirituales al reconocimiento de la Manifestación de Dios, Bahá'u'lláh Mismo, tal como se reveló después de la composición de esta obra. Además, cuando los dos paradigmas discernibles en este

texto – los cuatro senderos paralelos que conducen hacia Dios y las cuatro etapas de un solo sendero – se entienden como complementos el uno del otro, la amplitud del conocimiento que imparte *Los Cuatro Valles* con respecto a la naturaleza y capacidades de la humanidad es revelada, guiando al lector hacia prácticas de vida holísticas que nos permiten tener una armonía entre varias capacidades y potenciales humanas al tratar de adquirir una variedad completa de perfecciones humanas, tal como se prescribe en los Escritos Bahá'ís.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes that there is a thematic coherence between *The Four Valleys*, an early mystical work of Bahá'u'lláh, and His later revealed works—indeed, all the sacred Writings of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>1</sup> This coherence is not merely in terms of a common spiritual, and sometimes mystical, perspective in all of these works. A careful reading of the text of *The Four Valleys* reveals that Bahá'u'lláh is alluding, in an enigmatic style particular to mystical language, to the advent of His own Revelation. In other words, this text—which was revealed soon after Baha'u'llah's return from Sulaymáníyyih—functions as a harbinger

for the advent of the new Manifestation of God, bearing a new Revelation that will convey truth in various modes, including, but not limited to, mystical expression. Understanding the composition of *The Four Valleys* as part of Bahá'u'lláh initiation, soon after His return to Baghdad, of a historical process of revelation, resonates with Shoghi Effendi's description of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of His station in the Garden of Ridván: “So momentous a Declaration may well be regarded both as the logical consummation of that revolutionizing process which was initiated by Himself upon His return from Sulaymáníyyih, and as a prelude to the final proclamation of that same Mission to the world and its rulers from Adrianople” (*God Passes By* 151). Furthermore, in *The Four Valleys* Bahá'u'lláh provides a glimpse of the substance of the new Revelation, touching on some of its philosophical and theological underpinnings, and the principles it contains for the development of individuals and the associated progress of society. In that sense, *The Four Valleys* contains the nucleus of Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humankind, which was to be gradually revealed throughout His Revelation. In the course of exploring these allusive qualities of *The Four Valleys*, this paper will also show that a reading of the text as elucidating two complementary paradigms—four parallel paths towards the divine, and four stages of a single path—leads to a balanced and comprehensive understanding of human nature. This insight suggests practices

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1 I would like to express my deep appreciation for the valuable feedback provided by Ehsanollah Hemmat and the reviewers at the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. This work has benefited from my research at the “Hermeneutic Research on Eastern Philosophy” project of the Peking University Institute of Ancient Civilizations.

by which the wayfarer can nurture all aspects of human perfections and qualities, as envisioned in the totality of the Bahá'í Writings.

*The Four Valleys* is a highly abstruse mystical writing of Bahá'u'lláh written soon after His return from Kurdistan on 19 March 1856 (Cameron and Momen 62), for a prominent leader of the Qádirí Sufi Order, the learned Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Raḥmán-i-Ṭálibání of Karkúk—a city in the Kurdish area of Iraq (Walbridge 157–58). The renowned Shaykh, who “commanded the unwavering allegiance of at least a hundred thousand devout followers” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 122), had presumably asked for an explanation of a treatise written by Kamálu'd-Dín Ḥusayn Khárazmí, in which the author mentions four categories of people yearning for nearness to God (Rádmíhr, *Khoosh-i-Há'í* 172).

The Text was revealed in the Persian language, abundantly quoting from or making references to the Qur'án, *ḥadīth*,<sup>2</sup> and the works of Muslim mystics and poets. Therefore, it might seem reasonable to assume that one's understanding of the text depends on a thorough knowledge of pertinent prior literature and the traditional usage of mystical language, and that full awareness of Sufi thought is necessary. In order to better understand *The Four Valleys*, some scholars such as Rádmíhr (*Samávát* 37–38) deem it necessary

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2 Sayings attributed to Islamic holy figures and particularly to the prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth nabaví*), but not found in the Qur'án.

to study not only Islamic mystical philosophy and literature, but also the works of Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsá'í, Siyyid Kázim Ráshṭí and the Báb.

Furthermore, as the text is concise, cryptic, and highly allusive, it is a rich source for traditional research and footnoting, describing the cultural, historical, and literary contexts of its concepts, phrases, and terminologies. Such study of the text needs not only a background in Islamic mystical writings generally, but careful consideration of the four paths or stages of spiritual growth described by various Islamic mystic authors, and in particular the very treatise by Kamálu'd-Dín Ḥusayn Khárazmí that Bahá'u'lláh is believed to have been asked to explain. Rádmíhr and Savi have conducted extensive scholarly research in this vein, and have pointed to the similarities between *The Four Valleys* and the texts of Sufi adepts (Rádmíhr, *Samávát* 37; Savi 457). The works of both of these scholars are informed by a Bahá'í perspective and incorporate related Bahá'í Writings.

While the present research has greatly benefitted from the groundwork done by these and other scholars, this study attempts a different approach, largely ignoring the text's Sufi context and, instead, reading *The Four Valleys* in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's overall corpus of writings and the subsequent expositions by the central figures of the Faith.<sup>3</sup> The hope is that this partic-

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3 Nader Saiedi takes a similar approach in *Logos and Civilization* (41–42),

ular focus will complement previous research. As we can appreciate from Shoghi Effendi's elucidations, it is important to take into particular consideration the historical context in which *The Four Valleys* was revealed in order to gain an appropriate understanding of it.

Penned in the period following the Báb's martyrdom but prior to Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of His own mission, *The Four Valleys*—along with *The Seven Valleys*, *The Hidden Words*, and several other mystical writings of Bahá'u'lláh—presents a very concise and allusive account of what is to be revealed later. The particular style and language of mystical discourse are uniquely apt for the purpose of bridging the past and the future. Mystical texts are enigmatic and not expected to be easily comprehensible. They can allow for interpretations that might even seem contradictory. As such, these texts assist their readers to gradually become detached from the learnings of the past and develop new understandings, at a pace appropriate to their individual capacity. Bahá'u'lláh's writings prior to the declaration of His station and mission in 1863 were primarily in this mystical mode.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, while certain readers observe in Bahá'u'lláh's mystical texts merely a reflection of old traditions, others see in them glimpses of what was to come,

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with a particular focus on the Fourth Valley and the concept of destiny (*qadar*) (79–88).

4 Saiedi observes that early revelations of Muḥammad and the Báb were in “a predominantly poetic language” (17).

particularly as they develop an understanding of both the later writings of Bahá'u'lláh and His station. Therefore, we can reasonably propose that much of the meaning of *The Four Valleys* can be best understood in light of the totality of the Bahá'í Writings, despite the seeming aim of this text to respond, in the Sufi style, to questions relevant to Sufi beliefs and practices.

In addition to a careful reading of *The Four Valleys* itself, interpretations presented here are rooted in the texts revealed by the Báb, by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, and the works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. While the intertextual analysis of this research focuses on the Bahá'í Writings, our intra-textual analysis pays special attention to the relationships among concepts presented throughout the text, how these concepts are repeated or emphasized, how they precede, supersede, or complement each other, and how the wayfarer is guided progressively along the path of ever-higher perfection.

At the same time, the readers are asked to bear in mind that certain sacred texts, in particular those of a mystical nature, are not intended to convey merely one level of meaning. Therefore, through an intertextual comprehension of the Writings and the holy books of the past, one might be able to discover multiple layers of credible meanings that are in harmony with both Sufi doctrine and the Bahá'í Faith. This activity requires the reader to reflect and contemplate, just as Bahá'u'lláh counsels in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “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” (§21). Thus, this paper attempts to identify what, in the light of the totality of the Bahá'í Writings, can be understood as the primary message of the Four Valleys, while at times introducing alternative understandings.

### THE FOUR VALLEYS

Bahá'u'lláh introduces the purpose of His composition, *The Four Valleys*, in this manner: “O my eminent friend! They that seek to ascend to the heaven of mystic wayfaring are of four kinds only. I shall describe them in brief, that the signs and degrees of each may become plain and manifest to thee” (§8).<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, there are four kinds of wayfarers, each treading a particular path of spiritual progress. Bahá'u'lláh begins the introduction to each valley by mentioning a certain attribute of God as the objective which the wayfarers of that particular path pursue. The paths are different in that their final objective is stated differently; one can conclude that each type of wayfarer possesses a certain character, and particular dispositions and capacities, based on which they select their particular objective and path. The objectives which these different types of

wayfarers seek to approach are, in the order of the valleys, “the Sanctuary of the Desired One” (§9), “the Court of the All Praised” (§15), “the Abode of the Lodestone of hearts” (§20), and “the Beauty of the Beloved” (§28).

Before exploring how the text of each valley is illumined by the context of the Writings as a whole, a couple of preliminary points which will inform that exploration should be addressed. First, we can ask what the wayfarer's intended destination is. As the goal in each valley is associated with an attribute or name of God, all four paths lead the wayfarer to a single sublime and divine destination. One can interpret that single divine destination in different ways. According to the common Sufi understanding it is the realm of the divine, God Himself. The accomplished wayfarers ultimately join this realm, losing their own identity (Yathrebi 176). A detailed treatment of Sufi beliefs is beyond the scope of this paper, but generally speaking the Sufi conviction is that with God's assistance and through persistent pious exertion the wayfarer can reach that supreme divine objective and become one with it.<sup>6</sup> The

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5 Unless indicated otherwise, throughout this paper the notation “§” refers to paragraph numbers of *The Four Valleys* or, when specifically stated, *The Seven Valleys*, as they appear in *The Call of the Divine Beloved*.

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6 This is the “dying to the self and living in God” (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys* §76) which, in various Sufi models of wayfaring, is generally considered to be the ultimate destination of the mystic wayfarers' journey (Nicholson 28). The concept has been interpreted in various ways by Sufis adepts (see, for example, Yathrebi 451–65). Yet, Bahá'u'lláh considers this not to be the final point of the spiritual journey (*The Seven Valleys* §88).

Four Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh, written in the language and terminologies of the Sufis, would likely be understood in this way by a Sufi reader.

If we read the text in light of all the Writings, however, we see an important difference. We realize that, although each valley explains a certain aspect and attribute of God, these attributes are revealed to us through the intermediary Reality of the Manifestation of God, a Reality that represents God in the realm of creation. Furthermore, we understand that even the divine aspect of the Manifestation of God is beyond human comprehension and reach (Dávudí 328–29). Only through His attributes and signs can the Manifestation of God be known and that, too, is by degrees and relative to the wayfarer's capacity. This is because, in the hierarchy of existence, the lower level cannot comprehend the nature of the higher level: "differentiation of stages in the contingent world is an obstacle to understanding" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet 15*). These points are merely alluded to in the Four Valleys itself, but the reader familiar with Bahá'u'lláh's later writings on the ontology of God, His Manifestations, and human beings will understand that they are implicit. The first passage in *Gleanings*, for example, bears directly on these questions. In this prayer, Bahá'u'lláh first clarifies that human attempts to praise and understand God actually pertain to the Manifestation of God, Who is Himself "wholly subjected to [God's] sovereignty":

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence. For whatever such strivings may accomplish, they never can hope to transcend the limitations imposed upon Thy creatures, inasmuch as these efforts are actuated by Thy decree, and are begotten of Thine invention. The loftiest sentiments which the holiest of saints can express in praise of Thee, and the deepest wisdom which the most learned of men can utter in their attempts to comprehend Thy nature, all revolve around that Center Which is wholly subjected to Thy sovereignty, Which adoreth Thy Beauty, and is propelled through the movement of Thy Pen. (*Gleanings 1:3*)

Bahá'u'lláh then continues by pointing out that even the Manifestations, inasmuch as They manifest the Self of God, cannot be properly praised and comprehended by human beings, as there is no direct relationship between the created things and the divine reality of the Manifestation of God:

Nay, forbid it, O my God, that I should have uttered such words as must of necessity imply the existence of any direct relationship between the Pen of Thy Revelation and the essence of all created things. Far, far are They Who are related to Thee above the

conception of such relationship! All comparisons and likenesses fail to do justice to the Tree of Thy Revelation, and every way is barred to the comprehension of the Manifestation of Thy Self and the Dayspring of Thy Beauty. (*Gleanings* 1:4)

Therefore, an essential aspect of The Four Valleys is its focus on the station of the Manifestation of God, a unique, divine and sublime station whose essence cannot be understood, though its attributes can be to a degree perceived and emulated. This is quite different from the Sufi belief that the wayfarer's objective is to achieve a station higher than that of the prophets and become united with God Himself.<sup>7</sup>

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7 In Sufism the objective of the wayfarer has been "Union with Reality" (*faná fi 'l-Haqq*) (Nicholson 28). *Haqq* also refers to God and, in that sense, the early prominent Persian Sufi, Báyzád Bastámí, in relation to his own wayfaring proclaimed: "thirty years the high God was my mirror, now I am my own mirror" (Nicholson 17). His biographer explained this as meaning: "that which I was I am no more, for 'I' and 'God' is a denial of the unity of God . . . I went from God to God, until they cried from me in me, 'O Thou I!'" (Nicholson 17–18). Saiedi refers to the "frequent claims by many prominent Sufi that the station of Sufi saintliness (*viláyah*) is superior to the station of prophecy and apostolic legislation" (20). Yet, Schimmel believes that, despite some controversies among Sufis, "the traditional Sufi schools have always agreed upon the superiority of the prophet [over the Sufi saints]" (203).

The ways in which the text points to the Manifestation will be considered later in discussing each valley as a parallel path.

As a second preliminary point, we can consider in more detail the notion noted earlier, that there are two ways of understanding the four valleys in relation to each other. On one hand, the four valleys can be viewed as four different and parallel paths toward a sublime destination. Each path allows the wayfarer to make progress towards that ultimate objective. In this parallel understanding of the valleys, we cannot assume that each valley is a static state or station with fixed qualities in which a certain type of wayfarer resides. In this respect, the terms "plane" and "station" (*rutbih* and *maqám*, translated interchangeably), which refer to the valleys in the text, mean a path that one advances along,<sup>8</sup> a field in which one struggles for progress. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh says of the First Valley that "at the beginning this plane is the realm of conflict, yet it endeth in the ascent to the throne of glory" (¶9); and of the second: "On this plane, the traveller meeteth with many a trial and reverse" (¶16) and "one must make ready the receptacle and become worthy of the descent of the heavenly bestowals . . . 'For this let the striving strive!'" (¶19). The wayfarers strive, move, advance, and occasionally regress within

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8 The word "wayfarer" (*sálik*) literally means a traveler, especially on foot (among other meanings), and in mystical texts refers to the one who travels or walks on the path towards God.

their particular valleys. The text, on various occasions, explains the challenges and trial of the valleys, explicitly or implicitly advises the wayfarer on what should be done or avoided, and sets standards of excellence for the wayfarer.

Accordingly, this paper assumes that, based on an interpretation of the valleys as parallel paths, there exist different degrees of progress within each valley, leading the wayfarer nearer to the objective of that valley. If we go by Savi's interpretation that each valley can indicate a "different aspect of the mystic wayfaring of the same seeker" (80), a wayfarer can make progress in any or all of the four aspects. In that sense the four types of wayfarers can also represent four archetypes of wayfaring, reflecting the individual's inclinations and capacities, which can be different at different times in one's life. The parallel model, then, can apply either to four types of wayfarers, or the four kinds of wayfaring.

An alternative way of understanding *The Four Valleys* is that, in their path of progress, wayfarers sequentially move from one valley to the next—with each subsequent valley being at a higher level. In that sense, each valley specifies a certain level of progress. That would entail making progress in each valley before moving to the next. I call this paradigm the sequential model. The following exploration of how the text guides the seeker to the recognition of the Manifestation of God proceeds by first describing each of the four valleys from the perspective of the parallel

paradigm. This will be followed by an exploration of the sequential model. Ultimately, as we will see, one can arrive at the conclusion that the two models complement each other as the text does not strictly require a parallel or sequential understanding of the valleys.

### THE PARALLEL MODEL OF *THE FOUR VALLEYS*

Although *The Four Valleys* is written in a poetic and mystical language, a language that does not lend itself to a fixed and rigid structure, one can observe a general organization and a consistency of form throughout the body of the text. The description of each valley begins by mentioning the type of wayfarer that treads it and the distinct spiritual objective which the wayfarer of that valley strives for—an attribute of God or, more properly, of His Manifestation. This is immediately followed by introducing the specific theme of the valley—respectively, self, intellect, love, and the inmost heart—and then qualifying it by describing what is in fact meant by that theme and, in the case of the last two valleys, particularly emphasizing that what is meant is a mystery that cannot be readily described in words. Subsequently, the text explains in detail what is intended by treading the valley (and what is not), the tests and trials of the path, what the wayfarer needs to do or avoid doing, and the qualities of the exemplar wayfarers of that valley.

## THE FIRST VALLEY

In this valley, Self (*nafs*, at times translated as “soul”) is the path that those wayfarers in search of the Desired One pursue: “If the wayfarers be among them that seek after THE SANCTUARY OF THE DESIRED ONE, this plane pertaineth to the self—but the self which is intended is ‘the Self of God that pervadeth all His laws’” (¶9). The journey through this valley is fundamentally concerned with the transformation of the self. To see why this is so, and what this transformation entails, we can consider the implications of the “self” that this plane pertains to.

On its surface, the “Self of God” might be taken to mean God’s Essence. However, I would suggest that the way in which this very term is used elsewhere by Bahá’u’lláh shows that, in His Revelation, it consistently points to the Manifestation of God. For instance, He writes: “For the Ancient Being and Ocean of divine Truth hath eternally been exalted above the reach of all else besides Him. Therefore, the comprehension of the devoutest of mystics reverts to the recognition of the Manifestations of His Cause. They are the Self of God (*nafsu’lláh*) among His servants” (*Daryáyi-Dánish* 162).<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, in a prayer, we read that it is the Manifestation of God Who reveals God’s Self: “Him Who is the Manifestation of Thine own Self, and

the Revealer of Thy signs, and the Day-Spring of Thy Revelation, and the Repository of Thy Cause” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers* 139:4). In another prayer revealed by Bahá’u’lláh we read:

From everlasting Thou hast existed, alone with no one else beside Thee, and wilt, to everlasting, continue to remain the same, in the sublimity of Thine essence and the inaccessible heights of Thy glory.

And when Thou didst purpose to make Thyself known unto men, Thou didst successively reveal the Manifestations of Thy Cause, and ordained each to be a sign of Thy Revelation among Thy people, and the Day-Spring of Thine invisible Self amidst Thy creatures. (*Prayers* 78:3–4)

For a clear equation of the Self of God with the Manifestation, we can look at how Bahá’u’lláh describes the station of His forerunner, the Báb. In an untranslated Tablet, He advises the recipient:

Say: O people of the Bayán, to what religion do you adhere and which path are you faithful to? . . . If they say “To that of the Point of the Bayán [the Báb]”. . . ask them by what proof and evidence . . . and if they say “We recognized Him by His own Self,” Say: this is a clear lie, as up to now you have not even known your own selves, how much less the Self of God that pervadeth all

9 Throughout this paper, if the source cited is not in English, what is quoted is my provisional translation.

things (*nafsu'lláhu'l-qá'imah alá kull-i-shay'*).<sup>10</sup>

Then Bahá'u'lláh asks why they have not confessed to the truth of Himself, “the visible Self of God, shining as manifest as the sun” (Ishráq-i-Khávári, *Ma'idiyi-Ásmání* 26–27). Bahá'u'lláh expresses a similar concept with reference to Himself:

Say: Naught is seen in My temple but the Temple of God, and in My beauty but His Beauty, and in My being but His Being, and in My self but His Self, and in My movement but His Movement, and in My acquiescence but His Acquiescence, and in My pen but His Pen, the Mighty, the All-Praised. There hath not been in My soul but the Truth, and in Myself naught could be seen but God. (*Summons*, Súriy-i-Haykal ¶44, emphasis added)

Thus, when one looks at the Manifestation, one sees “but His [God's] Self . . . and in [Himself] naught could be seen but God.” It is clear from these other writings of Bahá'u'lláh that He uses the term “The Self of God” to refer to the Reality of the Manifestation of God, a reality that reveals God's names and attributes in the world of existence.<sup>11</sup>

10 This phrase resonates with “the Self of God that pervadeth all His laws,” a phrase found in the First Valley, originally from a prayer attributed to Imam ‘Alí (¶9).

11 While the object of the wayfarer is not attaining to God's Essence, the station

The Manifestation of God, then, is central to the process of transformation described in the journey of the First Valley. The nature of that transformation, too, is illumined by the context of the Bahá'í Writings as a whole. “Self” (*nafs*) in the Writings assumes a hierarchical set of meanings, as will be described later in detail. In relation to human beings, the lowest station in this hierarchy—what might be called the “lower self”—is a state and condition that is despised by God and needs to be transformed. The highest level that human beings can achieve—what we can refer to as our “higher self”—is a state that is aligned with God's Will: “This is the plane of the soul that is pleasing unto God” (¶10). Regarding the exalted station of this self, Bahá'u'lláh

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of the Manifestation of God—the Self of God—is in itself supremely lofty: as the phrase “the Self of God that pervadeth all things” suggests, the whole universe depends for its existence on the station of the Manifestation of God. As such, we observe a relationship between the notions of “Self of God”—referring to the Reality of the Manifestation of God—and “all things” (*kull-u-shay'*), the universe as a whole. Likewise, the Báb explains that the Sun of Will, i.e. the Primal Will (*mashíyyat-i-avvalíyyih*), one of His own titles, is observed in all things, because it is through the agency of the Primal Will that everything comes into existence (Bayán-i-Fársí 85). This resonates with Bahá'u'lláh's assertion in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*: “Say: It is in Our power, should We wish it, to cause all created things to expire in an instant, and, with the next, to endue them again with life” (¶75).

quotes a verse from the Qur'án (41:53): "Hence it is said: 'We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves, until it become plain to them that there is no God save Him'" (§11). The self of "themselves" in this verse of the Qur'án logically refers to the higher self that is a sign of God.

Treading the First Valley, then, means moving from the lower self towards the higher self, the station nearest to the Self of God (i.e., the Manifestation of God). Such a journey entails the realization of the higher nature of the human being, fulfilling the capacity with which it has been endowed. It is changing the self that is rejected into the self that is loved by God: "In this station the self is not rejected but beloved" (§9). It is in reference to this transformation of the self that the First Valley is described in these terms: "[a]lthough at the beginning this plane is the realm of conflict, yet it endeth in the ascent to the throne of glory" (§9). The word "conflict" (*jidál*) is of significance in relation to the nature of the transformation that needs to take place in the First Valley. Overcoming the lower self is unmistakably challenging and it has often been alluded to by the metaphor of war. Bahá'u'lláh elucidates the nature of the conflict at the heart of the transformation of the self in an untranslated Tablet:

Ye have no foe but your own self.  
Comprehend its nature, O people,  
and be not of the heedless. In no  
wise will it be satisfied; when it  
is fed its flame waxeth, and when

deprived, its appetite deepens.  
"Blessed now is he who has kept  
it pure"<sup>12</sup> in the name of His Lord,  
the Omnipotent, the Help in Peril,  
the Self-Subsisting. Say, slay it, O  
people, in my path. This is the true  
sacrifice for the love of the Mer-  
ciful. None but the sincere shall  
understand this. (*Áthár-i-Qalam-  
i-A'lá* 426)

In this last verse, by "sacrifice" Bahá'u'lláh seems to be referring to Abraham's attempt to sacrifice His son to God. Abraham is an emblem of sacrifice, a theme Bahá'u'lláh refers to in the First Valley as well, quoting a poem by Rúmi:

As it hath been said:

O Abraham of the Spirit and God's  
Friend in this day!  
Slay! Slay these four thieving  
birds of prey!  
that after death the mystery of life  
may be unravelled. (§9)

As we read in the endnote for this verse: "Here Rúmi tells a story of four evil birds which, when put to death, changed into four birds of goodness. The allegory refers to subduing evil qualities and replacing them with good" (*Call of the Beloved* 110).

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12 A reference to the Qur'án 91:7-10: "By a soul [*nafs*, self], and Him who balanced it, And breathed unto it its wickedness and its piety, Blessed now is he who hath kept it pure, And undone is he who hath corrupted it!" (Rodwell).

The formidable challenge of successfully transforming one's lower self into the self desired by God is elucidated in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: "The only people who are truly free of the 'dross of self' are the Prophets, for to be free of one's ego is a hall-mark of perfection. We humans are never going to become perfect, for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter. However, we must constantly mount higher, seek to be more perfect" (*Unfolding Destiny* 453).<sup>13</sup> The Manifestations of God hold an exalted station that no human being can reach. Taken together, then, the concept of the transformation of the self, and the identity of the Self of God with the Manifestation, along with the broader context for both of these provided in the Bahá'í Writings, clarifies the nature of the journey described in the First Valley. We can conclude that there exist varying degrees of progress for the wayfarers in the First Valley. The Sufi idea of attaining the station of the "Perfect Man" (*insán-i-kámil*)—a station equal or even higher than the station of Muḥammad, which certain Sufis believed to be an achievable objective—is replaced with the unending striving to draw ever nearer to the essentially inaccessible station of the Manifestation of God. Therefore, within the First Valley there is progress to be made toward the station of "the Self of God" by manifesting in one's

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13 In this letter, by "Prophets" is meant the Manifestations of God and not the minor prophets, as will be discussed later.

self the attributes of the Manifestation of God.

Our understanding of the concept of self in this valley can be further enriched by considering what Bahá'u'lláh might mean by stating that "[t]his station hath myriad signs and countless tokens" (¶11). In one of His tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions that there are numerous degrees and uncounted levels of the self (*nafs*), explaining fourteen levels or types that exist in the contingent world (*Makátib* 85–99).<sup>14</sup> These levels include various signs and tokens of God in nature and in the human world, but also the concepts of the destruction (*iḍmihlál*) and fall (*suqút*) of the self in human beings—concepts that relate to the most corrupt level of the self.<sup>15</sup> As such, the concepts of self in this Tablet relate to the process of transformation of the self from the most corrupt level to the loftiest.

The first three levels of the self that 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines are, in order of ascent, the mineral, vegetable, and animal realms—what we commonly call nature. The next ten are the hierarchy

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14 Refer to Rádmíhr 184–98 and Savi 332, 338–39 for a discussion of different levels of self in Islamic and Bahá'í texts.

15 This distinction between the lower and higher self in relation to human beings is important, as certain Sufi Orders (*Bekhtáshí* Sufis, and other Sufi orders referred to as "lawless dervishes") believe that, since God manifests His signs in the *whole* of existence, nothing in the world of being is undesirable—there is no right or wrong (Nicholson 95).

of the levels of self in humankind from the lowest to the loftiest, followed by the highest station in the hierarchy of selves, which belongs solely to the station of the Manifestation of God—the Self of God, as I argue, of the First Valley. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to the lowest level of self in the human being as the “insistent self” (*nafs-i-ammárah*). Regarding the “human self” or “human essence”<sup>16</sup> (*nafsu’l-insániyyah*) He writes:

Therefore, in each station it is referred to with a different term. For example, in the station of its descent to the lowest grades of animalistic selfish desires and its engagement with the vanities of the world, and its joy in wicked transitory wants and its stagnation by the chill of the world of being and its dampening of the warmth of the love of His Lord, the Most Glorious, the All-Bounteous, and its sinking in the abyss of waywardness and its vehement evil and rebellion, it is referred to as the insistent self<sup>17</sup> (*nafs ammárah*) even as He Himself hath said, and His word, verily, is the truth: “the soul is insistent on evil, unless

my Lord bestoweth His Mercy.”<sup>18</sup>  
(*Makátib* 87)

Furthermore, in relation to the insistent self, we read in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “O people of the world! Follow not the promptings of the self, for it summoneth insistently to wickedness and lust” (§64). This self is the lower nature of human beings that needs to be controlled and conquered, the self that is “rejected,” as referred to in the text of the First Valley (§9).

In contrast to the lower self that is rejected by God there exists the self that is loved by God. The highest level that human beings can achieve as defined by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—the level placed below the station of the Manifestation of God—is the self that God does not despise, but, rather, is pleased with. This seems to be the ultimate objective that the wayfarer can achieve in treading the First Valley: “This is the plane of the soul that is pleasing unto God, whereof He saith: ‘Enter thou among My servants, and enter thou My Paradise’<sup>19</sup>” (§10). Here again, I suggest that the soul that is pleasing unto God can be read as the soul that is pleasing to the Manifestation of God, Who, as Bahá’u’lláh elucidates in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, has the authority to decide what is acceptable and what is not: “Say: The very life of all deeds is My good pleasure, and all things depend upon Mine

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16 In *Gleanings* Shoghi Effendi translates *nafs* as “essence,” as among the meanings of the word are “essence” and “nature.”

17 The “insistent self” is the translation adopted most often in the Bahá’í Writings for the term *nafs ammárah* mentioned in the Qur’án 12:53.

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18 Qur’án 12:53, my translation based on the previous footnote. Rodwell’s is: “for the heart is prone to evil, save theirs on whom my Lord hath mercy . . .”

19 Qur’án: 89:29–30

acceptance. Read ye the Tablets that ye may know what hath been purposed in the Books of God, the All-Glorious, the Ever Bounteous" (§36).

In sum, then, when read in the context of the Bahá'í Writings as a whole, and taken as one of four parallel paths, the First Valley describes the journey of the wayfarer who, by keeping the Self of God—the Manifestation—in view as the goal, transforms her or his own self, subduing the lower nature and becoming ever more pleasing to God.

## THE SECOND VALLEY

The Second Valley is the realm of intellect (*aql*): "If the wayfarers be among them that dwell in THE COURT OF THE ALL-PRAISED, this is the station of the Intellect" (§15). This valley is associated with the faculties of reasoning, knowledge, and learning, and in the text of this valley we find concepts and terms related to education and the fostering of knowledge: "the school of God" (§15), "to seek after knowledge," "God will teach you" (§16), "[t]his station is that of the true standard of knowledge," and "[k]nowledge is a light" (§18). These concepts, viewed in light of the Writings as a whole, elucidate the relationship between knowledge and "Intellect" which is at the core of the Second Valley.

Bahá'u'lláh explains that by "Intellect" in this valley He intends "the universal divine Intellect, whose sovereignty fostereth the growth of all things, and not every vain and feeble

mind" (§15). Accordingly, the universal divine Intellect nurtures the world of creation. As was the case with the Self, Intellect in this valley refers to an aspect of the Reality of the Manifestation of God. Differentiating between the human intellect and divine Intellect, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

But the universal divine Intellect, which transcends nature, is the out-pouring grace of the pre-existent Power. It encompasses all existing realities and receives its share of the lights and mysteries of God. It is an all-knowing power, not a power of investigation and sensing. The spiritual power associated with the world of nature is the power of investigation, and it is through investigation that it discovers the realities and properties of things. But the heavenly intellectual power, which is beyond nature, encompasses, knows, and comprehends all things; is aware of the divine mysteries, truths, and inner meanings; and discovers the hidden verities of the Kingdom. This divine intellectual power is confined to the holy Manifestations and the Day-springs of prophethood. A ray of this light falls upon the mirrors of the hearts of the righteous, that they may also receive, through the holy Manifestations, a share and benefit of this power. (*Some Answered Questions* 58:4)

In a Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that, as opposed to the "lesser

intellect” (*aql-i-juz'í*, translated as “meagre reason” in *The Four Valleys* ¶15) of certain human minds, Intellect refers to the station of “the ultimate Source of knowledge,” the Manifestation of God:

By the Intellect mentioned above is meant the universal divine Mind. How often hath it been observed that certain human minds, far from being a source of guidance, have become as fetters upon the feet of the wayfarers and prevented them from treading the straight Path! The lesser intellect being thus circumscribed, one must search after Him Who is the ultimate Source of knowledge and strive to recognize Him. And should one come to acknowledge that Source round Whom every mind doth revolve, then whatsoever He should ordain is the expression of the dictates of a consummate wisdom. His very Being, even as the sun, is distinct from all else beside Him. The whole duty of man is to recognize Him; once this hath been achieved, then whatsoever He may please to ordain is binding and in full accordance with the requirements of divine wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

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20 This twin duty, recognition of “Him,” and obedience to whatever “He” ordains, along with the reference in the next sentence to the ordinances and prohibitions laid down by the Prophets, makes it clear that the “Him” referred to here is the Manifestation of God. It mirrors the opening passage of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, which

Thus have ordinances and prohibitions of every kind been laid down by the Prophets of the past, even unto the earliest times. (*Tabernacle* 2:23)

It is also clear in the Bahá'í Writings that the Manifestation is the supreme source of knowledge and enlightenment. For example, Bahá'u'lláh, referring to the Manifestations of God, says: “They are the Treasuries of Divine knowledge, and the Repositories of celestial wisdom” (*Gleanings* 19:3). He also refers to His own Revelation as the appearance of the sun of knowledge: “The Daystar of knowledge is manifest and the Luminary of insight hath appeared. Fortunate indeed is the one who hath attained, who hath witnessed, and who hath recognized” (*Tabernacle* 3:10). He also writes: “In such wise, we bestow upon you the fruit of the Tree of divine knowledge, that ye may gladly and joyously abide in the Riḍván of divine wisdom” (*Kitáb-i-Íqan* 12).

#### HUMAN INTELLECT

Recognizing that the Intellect referred to at the outset of the Second Valley refers primarily to the station of the Manifestation of God helps illumine

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makes the first duty the recognition of “Him who is the Dayspring of His [God’s] Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation” – an unmistakable reference to the Manifestation (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 1).

the nature of the wayfarer's journey. The wayfarer is instructed to recognize that Source of divine knowledge and benefit from His bounties. After quoting the *hadith*, "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth" (§18), Bahá'u'lláh continues: "Wherefore, one must make ready the receptacle and become worthy of the descent of heavenly bestowals, that the all-sufficing Cup-Bearer may give one to drink of the wine of bounty from the crystal chalice of mercy. 'For this let the striving strive!'" (§19).

Yet, in contrast to the knowledge that is the fruit of the heavenly bestowals, there exists knowledge which is the product of "meagre reason" (*'aql-i-juz'í*), as we noted earlier. Regarding the limitations of the unaided human intellect Bahá'u'lláh quotes a poem: "How can meagre reason comprehend the Book, Or the spider trap a phoenix in its web?" (§15).

The context provided by the treatment of human reason in the Writings as a whole can elucidate the nature of the knowledge-centered journey of the Second Valley. While those Writings emphasize the meagerness of the human intellect from a certain perspective, they also assign great value to the God-given faculties of intellect and the power of reflection (*quvviyi mutafak-kirih*): "O people of Bahá! The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being

and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 72). In the Bahá'í Faith the power of rationality is highly esteemed, and all are urged to take advantage of their capacity of intellect and reflection for acquiring sciences, crafts and arts:

Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words. Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world. Unto this beareth witness the Mother Book in this conspicuous station (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 26–27).

The Bahá'í Writings also insist that human rationality, sciences and arts are not adequate by themselves; they do not make humanity independent of spiritual education, the insight bestowed by God. Humans stand in need of the divine intellectual power, and to obtain a share of that power they must recognize the station of the Manifestation of God, as the knowledge bestowed by God can only be learned in "the school of God" (§15). Manifestations of God are divine educators. They reveal the true source of enlightenment, but to be able to attain such enlightenment

one needs to fully obey Their laws and commandments. This full obedience to divine teachers is associated with the concept of the fear of God—a fear that leads to learning, as we read in the First Valley: “Fear ye God; God will teach you” (¶18, Qur’án 2:282). This is a fear that inspires pious action as the word “fear ye” (*ittaquú*) is a derivative of the word *taqvá* meaning piety. In fact, it is only by meeting certain mental and spiritual criteria that one can qualify for acquiring knowledge bestowed by God. In *Some Answered Questions* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the characteristics of a true seeker of “the knowledge of the Sun of Truth”:

[T]he seeker must therefore be endowed with certain attributes. First, he must be fair-minded and detached from all save God. His heart must be entirely directed towards the Supreme Horizon and freed from the bondage of vain and selfish desires, for these are obstacles on the path. Furthermore, he must endure every tribulation, embody the utmost purity and sanctity, and renounce the love or hatred of all the peoples of the world, lest his love for one thing hinder him from investigating another, or his hatred for something prevent him from discerning its truth. This is the station of search, and the seeker must be endowed with these qualities and attributes—that is, until he attains this station it will be impossible for him to gain the knowledge of the Sun of Truth. (10:7)

Impurity of heart and the “bondage of vain and selfish desires” can lead one to rely solely on one’s “meagre reason” and its futile and deceitful knowledge. In the *Kitáb-i-Íqan*, Bahá'u'lláh rejects superstitious sciences and philosophies that were the source of pride for a certain clergyman, Karímkhán Kirmání, reputed as a prominent scholar of his time, one who “imagined himself a learned man and regarded the rest of the people ignorant” (185). Karímkhán had considered knowledge of more than twenty sciences as a requirement for understanding the ascent of Muḥammad to heaven, among them “the science of metaphysical abstractions, of alchemy, and natural magic.” Bahá'u'lláh continues: “Such vain and discarded learnings, this man hath regarded as the pre-requisites of the understanding of the sacred and abiding mysteries of divine Knowledge” (185–86).

Referring to the fact that knowledge obtained through “meagre reason” by itself can become a veil, preventing one from understanding spiritual truth, Bahá'u'lláh further elucidates: “We have consumed this densest of all veils, with the fire of the love of the Beloved—the veil referred to in the saying: ‘The most grievous of all veils is the veil of knowledge.’ Upon its ashes, We have reared the tabernacle of divine knowledge. We have, praise be to God, burned the “veils of glory” with the fire of the beauty of the Best-Beloved” (*Kitáb-i-Íqan* 187–88). We see that in these verses Bahá'u'lláh provides a standard for avoiding the

trap of knowledge that is derived from the human intellect alone, which becomes a veil. He advises that by the fire of “the love of the Beloved” one can burn the veil of limited knowledge and acquire “divine knowledge.”

### THE THIRD VALLEY

This valley is the realm of love: “If the lovers be among them that abide within the precincts of THE ABODE OF THE LODESTONE OF HEARTS, no soul may dwell on this kingly throne save the countenance of love” (¶20). In relation to this verse, certain terms need particular attention. The phrase “them that abide” (*‘ákiḥín*) often refers to devoted believers who remain or dwell in the proximity of holy places.<sup>21</sup> They reside in “the precincts,” the quarters, grounds, or areas surrounding that holy place—in this case “the abode of the Lodestone of hearts.” This is the abode housing the “kingly throne,” a throne that can only be occupied by the “countenance of love.” On this reading, the “kingly throne” is not occupied by the wayfarers of this valley; it is rather the seat of “the countenance of love.” Love in mystical texts refers to the wayfarer’s love for God. The Bahá’í Writings often refer to the love for the Manifestation of God, the One who represents God in the world of creation, as in: “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty” (Bahá’u’lláh,

Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶4). I would argue that, in keeping with the allusions in the first two valleys to the Manifestation of God, the “countenance of love” in this valley also refers to the Reality of the Manifestation.

We come across the term “countenance” (*tal’at*, which can also mean “figure” or “shape”) referring to the Manifestation of God in several writings of Bahá’u’lláh. For instance, in the following passages from the Kitáb-i-Íqán, *tal’at* is the word translated as “Soul”:

When the Unseen, the Eternal, the Divine Essence, caused the Day Star of Muḥammad to rise above the horizon of knowledge, among the cavils which the Jewish divines raised against Him was that after Moses no Prophet should be sent of God. Yea, mention hath been made in the Scriptures of a Soul Who must needs be made manifest and Who will advance the Faith, and promote the interests of the people of Moses, so that the Law of the Mosaic Dispensation may encompass the whole earth. (¶147)

From these statements therefore it hath been made evident and manifest that should a Soul in the “End that knoweth no end” be made manifest, and arise to proclaim and uphold a Cause which in “the Beginning that hath no beginning” another Soul had proclaimed and upheld, it can be truly declared of Him Who is the Last and of Him Who was the First that they are

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21 For instance, “Those who reside constantly at Jerusalem from motives of piety” (Steingass 831).

one and the same, inasmuch as both are the Exponents of one and the same Cause. (¶171)

In these cases, Soul—as a translation of *tal'at* (countenance)—refers to the Manifestations of God. We also read in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, in an explanation of biblical prophecy: “Thereupon, they will behold the countenance of the promised One, the adored Beauty, descending from heaven and riding upon the clouds” (¶74).

The use of “countenance” in reference to the Manifestation can also be found in the “Ode of the Dove,” where Bahá'u'lláh recounts His vision of the Maiden of Heaven: “The light from such a countenance so attracted me; its brightness outshone every bright sun” (45). The Maiden of Heaven whose countenance Bahá'u'lláh was enthralled by is “a symbolic personification of the divine reality of Bahá'u'lláh” (Hatcher, J., A. Hemmat and E. Hemmat 9). In the “*Rashh-i-Amá*,”<sup>22</sup> Bahá'u'lláh uses *tal'at* in a similar way, as well as its derivative *tal'*, and another term also meaning countenance (*vajh*). Thus, He refers to “that mystic truth which from His Countenance is raining down” (*Call* ¶3) and calls on the listener to “Behold the Lord’s leviathan, behold His sacred countenance” (¶12) and to “[b]ehold the Countenance Divine! Behold the Maid of Paradise!” (¶15). Given the

context of the poem, in which He is summoning creation to recognize His own dawning Manifestation, the “countenance” in each case can reasonably be interpreted as a reference to that Manifestation. Likewise, then, “the countenance of love” in the opening sentence of the Third Valley—“no soul may dwell on this kingly throne save the countenance of love”—can be perceived as the Reality of the Manifestations of God.

Bahá'u'lláh begins the explanation of this valley with: “I am powerless to describe this station or to depict it in words” (¶20). He later points out that “[i]n this station, neither the reign of the intellect is sufficient nor the rule of self” (¶22). In this valley one’s heart is drawn to God rather than knowing God through logic or comprehension. Being filled with awe and wonder at the beauty of the Beloved, the wayfarer is not in need of knowledge or reasoning:

The lovers’ teacher is the Loved One’s beauty,

His face their lesson and their only book.

Learning of wonderment, of longing love their duty;

Not on learned chapters and dull themes they look. (¶25)

Given that this valley is explicitly beyond description, much of what we might learn of it will be through this contrast and comparison that Bahá'u'lláh makes between the Love of this valley, and the Self of the First Valley and in particular the Knowledge

22 Bahá'u'lláh’s mystical poem, composed during His captivity in the *Síyáh-Chal* where He received the first intimation of His Revelation.

or Intellect of the Second Valley. An exploration of this contrast is better suited to the sequential paradigm for studying the Four Valleys, and will thus be taken up later.

## THE FOURTH VALLEY

The Fourth Valley begins with: “If the mystic knowers be among them that have attained THE BEAUTY OF THE BELOVED, this station is the throne of the inmost heart and the secret of divine guidance. This is the seat of the mystery ‘He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth’” (¶28). In these opening verses Bahá'u'lláh refers to the station of Manifestation of God by the phrase “the throne of the inmost heart,” and by the maxim “He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth.”

“Inmost heart,” is a translation for the Arabic word *fu'ád*, meaning heart. The word is used in certain cases in the Bahá'í Writings to refer to the station of the Manifestation of God. For instance, the Báb makes a reference to the Qur'anic verses about the nightly ascent of Muḥammad to heaven (53:6–8), which brought Him to within a short distance of the throne of God. The Báb then declares that His own call is issued from the light of the inmost heart in the precincts of the throne of God: “O exponents of love, hearken to My call raised in very truth from the radiance of the inmost heart, before the loftiest Point of adoration, round the exalted throne of God. He is God, the All Glorious, the Eternal”

(qtd. in Rádmíhr, *Samávát* 394). In this context the inmost heart is referring to the inner reality or the divine aspect of the Manifestation of God. Similarly, in the opening section of the Fourth Valley the word “inmost heart” is used in a context that suggests a station beyond the full attainment of human beings, the station of the Manifestation of God (though see the discussion of the sequential paradigm, below, in which “inmost heart” can also be construed as a reference to the ultimate attainment of the wayfarer).

Another allusion made to the station of the Manifestation of God is “He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth,” a saying that appears with similar translation in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* to underline the authority of the Manifestation of God:

The significance and essential purpose underlying these words is to reveal and demonstrate unto the pure in heart and the sanctified in spirit that they Who are the Luminaries of truth and the Mirrors reflecting the light of divine Unity, in whatever age and cycle they are sent down from their invisible habitations of ancient glory unto this world, to educate the souls of men and endue with grace all created things, are invariably endowed with an all-compelling power, and invested with invincible sovereignty. For these hidden Gems, these concealed and invisible Treasures, in themselves manifest and vindicate the reality

of these holy words: “Verily God doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth whatsoever He pleaseth.” (97)

Therefore the Fourth Valley begins by making a reference to the station of the Manifestation of God.

#### THE REVELATION OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

The sequence of elucidations made by Bahá'u'lláh in the Fourth Valley further suggests that the text is primarily meant to convey the station of the Manifestations of God, while simultaneously hinting at the imminent advent of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Highlights of the systematic expositions of Bahá'u'lláh about His own station and His Revelation will be briefly discussed, followed by an exploration of the meanings of certain allusions made in this regard.

The text of the Fourth Valley begins by portraying an exalted station that cannot be fully comprehended: “a bottomless sea that none shall ever fathom” (¶28). Bahá'u'lláh also elucidates that this mystery refers to the station and authority of the Manifestations of God: “This is the seat of the mystery ‘He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth’” (¶28). He makes it clear that no human striving will suffice to understand the mystery of “He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth.” This passage merits quoting in full, for it contains one of the clearest allusions to His own station in the text:

This is the seat of the mystery “He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth.” *Should all that are in heaven and on earth attempt to unravel this exalted allusion and subtle mystery, from now until the Day whereon the Trumpet shall sound, yet would they fail to comprehend even a letter thereof, for this is the station of God’s immutable decree and His foreordained mystery.* Hence, when asked regarding this matter, He made reply: “It is a bottomless sea that none shall ever fathom.” And when the question was repeated, He answered: “It is the blackest of nights through which none can find his way.”

Whoso comprehendeth this station will assuredly conceal it, and were he to reveal but the faintest trace thereof, they would assuredly hang him from the gallows. *And yet, by God, were a true seeker to be found, I would divulge it to him;* for He saith: “Love is a distinction never conferred upon a heart possessed by fear and dread.” (¶28–29, emphasis added)

Having asserted flatly that all of humanity combined could never unravel this mystery, pertaining to the station of “God’s immutable decree and His foreordained mystery,” Baha'u'llah then claims that He *can* divulge the station, and would in fact do so “were a true seeker to be found.” He alludes here to His privileged understanding as a Manifestation of God, an understanding

beyond that of “all that are in heaven and on earth.” Bahá'u'lláh also explains that His concealment of this mystery is not due to His fear of tribulations, even though persecution is sure to follow the revelation of “but the faintest trace thereof”; indeed, were it left to Him (“were it not contrary to the commandment of the Book”) Bahá'u'lláh would enrich and thank His “would-be murderer.” (¶29–32)

It will be noted that the persecutions that await the one who reveals the mystery might have been read, in the Sufi context, as a reference to the fate of mystics such as the legendary Sufi figure Manṣúr Ḥalláj (d. 922 A.D.) who was brutally tortured and hanged after he allegedly identified himself with the divine, implying the unification of his own self with the Self of God (Schimmel 62–77). To Sufis, Ḥalláj has been a symbol for disclosing secrets and mysteries that others are not able to comprehend. On one level, then, the reader may derive insight from seeing this quotation as a reference to the wayfarer possessing spiritual insight that cannot be readily shared with others. But in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be ready, and waiting, to reveal a mystery that all those in heaven and earth can never unravel by themselves, it can be also understood as the story of the persecution of the Manifestations of God when they reveal Their unique station, a spiritual rank beyond the comprehension of the masses. In particular it can be a foretelling of the calamities Bahá'u'lláh Himself will face by revealing His station.

#### *THE GARMENT OF JOSEPH*

Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh continues by alluding to the fact that the time to reveal this exalted and mysterious station is near. The vehicle for this allusion is His reference to Joseph: “Methinks at this moment I perceive the musk-scented fragrance of the garment of Há' from the Joseph of Bahá; verily He seemeth near at hand, though ye may think Him far away” (¶33).

The use of this reference is particularly apt. On the one hand, Joseph, in the Islamic tradition, represents divine beauty, and the Báb had already associated Joseph with the concept of a new Revelation by framing His first revealed work, begun on the evening of His declaration to Mullá Ḥusayn, as a commentary on the Quranic Surih of Joseph. The story of Joseph is the story of reunification with the divine beauty; as such it is well suited to express the idea of humanity's “reunification” with God through the advent of a new Manifestation. When Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, his father Jacob suffers terribly from the loss of his beloved son, and goes blind in his grief. But he does not give up hope of Joseph's return, and when Joseph has his garment sent to Jacob, the father detects his son's fragrance from afar, even before the garment reaches him. Jacob's long years of suffering come to an end as the garment of Joseph cures his blindness, and he attains reunion with his lost son. In light of this story, the reference to Joseph in the passage of the Fourth Valley cited earlier can

be perceived as referring to the advent of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. The quotation of Rúmi's poem immediately following again alludes to Joseph through the invocation of "fragrance," and hints at a renewal of bliss—the arrival of a particularly felicitous time in human history:

My soul doth sense the fragrant  
breath  
Of a well-beloved soul:  
The fragrance of that kindly  
friend  
Who's my heart's desire and  
goal.  
The duty of long years of love  
obey,  
And tell the tale of blissful days  
gone by,  
That land and sky may laugh  
aloud today,  
And it may gladden mind and  
heart and eye" (§33).

But there is further reason for Bahá'u'lláh's identification with Joseph. One of Bahá'u'lláh's greatest sources of suffering as He revealed His unique and exalted station as "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest" was to be His half-brother, Mirza Yahyá, who out of jealousy attempted to usurp Bahá'u'lláh's authority. While the beginnings of Yahyá's rebellion were already present in the Baghdad period, it would not be until after Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration of His station as Manifestation that this rebellion would reach its zenith, leading to a full rupture in Adrianople. It was due in large part to

the machinations of Yahyá and his allies that Bahá'u'lláh was finally exiled from Adrianople to 'Akká. Joseph, too, was the victim of his brothers' jealousy: they sold him into slavery, leading to his exile in Egypt and his long separation from his father. While this layer of meaning in the invocation of Joseph might not have been apparent to the early readers of The Four Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh returns to it in other places in His Revelation. In explanations of verses of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas it is brought to our attention that "Bahá'u'lláh, in one of His Tablets, describes Himself as the 'Divine Joseph' Who has been 'bartered away' by the heedless 'for the most paltry of prices'" (165).

There are still other levels of meanings associated with the allegory of the garment of Joseph pertinent to the current discussion. In a Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh interprets garment to mean religion,<sup>23</sup> and in that sense "the garment of Há' from the Joseph of Bahá'" refers to the new divine teachings appropriate for this age, to be revealed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself:

And now concerning thy question  
regarding the nature of religion.  
Know thou that they who are truly  
wise have likened the world unto  
the human temple. As the body of  
man needeth a garment to clothe

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23 Also refer to Bahá'u'lláh's *Gems of Divine Mysteries* where garment symbolizes borrowed beliefs adopted by people that need to be removed and replaced with "the robe of His mercy and the raiment of His guidance" (§17).

it, so the body of mankind must needs be adorned with the mantle of justice and wisdom. Its robe is the Revelation vouchsafed unto it by God. Whenever this robe hath fulfilled its purpose, the Almighty will assuredly renew it. For every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared. (*Gleanings* 81)

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* this connection to Joseph is more explicit “Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savor of My garment can be smelled” (¶4). The idea of the savor or fragrance of a garment is again an unmistakable allusion to the story of Joseph and Jacob. Thus, for the reader of *The Four Valleys* who is also familiar with the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the “musk-scented fragrance of the garment of Há from the Joseph of Bahá’” can be seen as an allusion to Baha’u’llah’s impending Revelation – “verily He seemeth near at hand” (¶33).

#### *THE CHOICE WINE AND HEAVENLY BREAD*

In addition to the symbolic references to the Quranic story of Joseph, his garment and its fragrance, the text of the Fourth Valley alludes to the advent of the new Revelation through a variety of other metaphors and Islamic verses. There are certain noteworthy allusions made to food and drink in the text of the Fourth Valley: “This is the food

whose savour changeth not and whose colour altereth not” (¶37). “How clear this crystal water that the enraptured Cup-Bearer passeth round! How exquisite this pure wine that the intoxicated Beauty doth proffer! How pleasing this draught of joy that floweth from the Heavenly Cup! Well is it with him who drinketh thereof, and tasteth of its sweetness, and attaineth unto its knowledge” (¶38).

We can locate various interpretations of these allusions in the Writings, explaining how drink and food symbolize what is revealed by the Manifestations of God. We read in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: “We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power” (¶5). In His writings, Bahá’u’lláh identifies the “choice Wine” with His Revelation whose “musk-laden fragrance” has been wafted “upon all created things” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* notes 165–166). Also, we see in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* that Bahá’u’lláh likens His own elucidations to food and bread, quoting verses from the *Qur’án* (76:9, 5:114):

“We nourish your souls for the sake of God; we seek from you neither recompense nor thanks.” This is the food that conferreth everlasting life upon the pure in heart and illumined in spirit. This is the bread of which it is said: “Lord, send down upon us Thy bread from heaven.” This bread shall never be withheld from them that deserve it, nor can it ever be exhausted. . . . O the pity! that man should deprive himself of

this goodly gift, this imperishable bounty, this everlasting life. It behooveth him to prize this food that cometh from heaven, that perchance, through the wondrous favours of the Sun of Truth, the dead may be brought to life, and withered souls be quickened by the infinite Spirit. (23–24)

As such, we can conclude that Bahá'u'lláh's allusions to food, wine, and water in the Fourth Valley refer to the Revelation, the Word of God, the religious truth revealed by the Manifestations of God; in the context of Bahá'í history, they refer specifically to His own Revelation, and the new laws, principles and counsels soon to be disclosed.

#### *HIS WAYS DIFFER EVERY DAY*

In the Fourth Valley, Bahá'u'lláh also alludes to the progressive and periodic nature of the Revelation of God, bestowed upon humanity through the reality of the Manifestation of God Who, in each age, reveals what is appropriate for that specific time in the history of mankind. As mentioned earlier, at the beginning of this valley we read: “This is the seat of the mystery ‘He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth’” (¶28). What Bahá'u'lláh quotes here is an Islamic saying that according to His Own later elucidations refers to the authority of the Manifestation of God: “O *Shaykh*! Every time God the True One—exalted be His glory—revealed Himself in the

person of His Manifestation, He came unto men with the standard of ‘He doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth.’ None hath the right to ask why or wherefore, and he that doth so, hath indeed turned aside from God, the Lord of Lords” (*Epistle* 67). Among the powers bestowed upon the Manifestations of God is the power to change the laws revealed by the previous Manifestation or to bring new laws appropriate to the current age.

Yet, although the laws of the new Revelation may differ from those of a previous Revelation, they are issued from the same divine source and in that sense they are not different: “Albeit at every moment a new condition be displayed, yet that condition is ever the same. Wherefore He saith in one instance, ‘Nothing whatsoever keepeth Him from being occupied with any other thing.’ And in another He saith, ‘Verily, His ways differ every day’” (¶36). The first passage quoted by Bahá'u'lláh is a Qur'anic verse (55:29) and the second a famous Islamic adage. The two are often quoted together in literature and can be understood as meaning that God is aware and attentive to all conditions and situations and therefore can attend to the needs and requirements of each particular age. The late scholar *Ishráq-i-Khávarí* understands the quotes as referring to the process of progressive revelation through the appearance of the Manifestations of God. In his observation, the Qur'anic verse is stating the fact that the Manifestations, being representatives of God, are aware of all realities

of the world of existence (*Qámús-i-Mukhtaṣar* 62). Furthermore, he explains that the saying “Verily, His ways differ every day,” refers to the concept of progressive revelation—in each age the Manifestations of God reveal what is in accordance with the requirements of that age (62–63). Accordingly, the Manifestations of God being at once aware of all states and conditions of the world have the authority to change religious laws to make them appropriate to the present condition of the world. In that sense, the Fourth Valley alludes to the occurrence of a historical event, the appearance of a new Manifestation of God, in accordance with God’s plan for the progressive advancement of humanity.

We can conclude this exploration of the paradigm of four parallel paths by reiterating that it is impossible for human beings to comprehend the divine nature of the station associated with each of the four valleys—“the Self of God that pervadeth all His laws” (¶9), “the universal divine Intellect” (¶15), “the countenance of love” (¶20), and “the throne of the inmost heart and the secret of divine guidance” (¶28)—all being aspects of the Manifestation of God. In that sense, we can consider the four valleys as four possible paths toward the same hidden and transcendent Reality. The four types of wayfarer each find a certain path to be the most direct—or the one most suitable to his or her capacity and inclination—in their journey towards that sublime Reality, eternally approachable yet forever out of reach.

#### THE SEQUENTIAL MODEL OF THE FOUR VALLEYS

Yet, this paradigm might not be sufficient for a complete understanding The Four Valleys, as we can observe a sequential relationship between the valleys as well. As we have noted earlier, the explanation of each valley begins with a description of the unique character of the kind of wayfarer who traverses it, with phrases such as: “If the wayfarers be among them that dwell in the court of the All-Praised” (¶15). On its face, the text does not designate a sequential or hierarchical relationship between the four types of wayfarers—none is qualified as preceding the other or as being more advanced on the path of search. Furthermore, treading a valley is not explicitly conditioned on the completion of another valley, unlike in The Seven Valleys. As such, whereas The Seven Valleys can be viewed as describing the seven stages of a single mystical path, The Four Valleys appears to be explaining four distinct parallel paths that can each be trodden by a specific type of wayfarer.

Although, based on the above description, The Seven Valleys has a sequential character and The Four Valleys a parallel one, neither the sequential nor the parallel model is a sufficient representation of what we read in these texts. The seven valleys can be traversed “with but one step” (¶56) and the four valleys, as implied in the text, possess a progressive and sequential nature. Ascribing both parallel and sequential characters to The Four Valleys

may seem contradictory, and scholars have generally settled upon one or the other reading. For example, Savi explains: “The Valleys described in the Four Valleys do not seem to be four successive stages of a single spiritual journey, but each Valley seems to describe a different kind of mystic wayfaring or different aspect of the mystic wayfaring of the same seeker” (80). Walbridge, on the other hand, sees the four Valleys as sequential stages of one path, as he believes is the case with The Seven Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh (58).

This paper proposes that in The Four Valleys, although the four paths can be perceived as possessing a parallel nature, they also demonstrate a sequential, progressive character.<sup>24</sup> Understanding the sequential character of The Four Valleys is important as it has implications not only for individual life practices but also for one's family, community and society, as will be briefly discussed later.

The parallel model of the valleys assumes that each type of wayfarer treads a specific path. In the sequentially progressive model, instead, wayfarers maintain what they have gained in the previous valley and supplement it with what is learned in the new valley.

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24 Similarly, while the sequential character of the valleys is strong in The Seven Valleys, I would argue that this should not be understood in absolute terms because in one sense each of the seven valleys describes a certain aspect of the wayfarer's spiritual progress, aspects that can in certain cases and to various degrees be developed in parallel.

In this paradigm the wayfarer needs to retain harmony between approaches, integrating the various faculties and capacities that human beings are endowed with. The sequential aspect of The Four Valleys can be demonstrated in two ways: first, through a careful attention to certain expressions used in the text, and secondly, through a meticulous reading of what is implied in the whole of the text.

On the first point, certain specific words and phrases in the text of The Four Valleys strongly suggest that the First Valley is the starting point and the Fourth Valley is the final point of the wayfarer's spiritual journey (Saiedi 79–83). Let us look, for example, at the words emphasized in the two following excerpts. In the First Valley we read “If *the wayfarers* be among them that *seek* after the *sanctuary* of the desired one” (¶9, emphasis added) whereas in relation to the Fourth Valley we read “If *the mystic knowers* be among them that have *attained the beauty of the beloved*” (¶28). We see that the term “wayfarer,” the one who treads the path mentioned in the First Valley, is replaced in the Fourth Valley with “the mystic knower,” the one who has achieved spiritual understanding. Furthermore, the wayfarer's condition in the First Valley as one of those who “seek” is replaced in the Fourth Valley with the condition of one who has “attained.” Likewise, the “sanctuary” wherein “the Desired One” resides, is replaced with the “Beauty of the Beloved” itself. The seeker who has been seeking the sanctuary is now beholding

the countenance of the Beloved. This comparison between the two sets of images suggests a clear distinction between the First Valley as the starting point of the wayfaring and the Fourth Valley as the final destination.

On the second point, when read as a whole, the text of *The Four Valleys* reveals an integrated, sequential relationship between all the valleys: there is language linking each valley and the next, indicating progression, completion of the previous stage, and at times a re-emphasis of the earlier stage(s).

We can begin with the relationship between the First Valley, which prescribes the transformation of the self of the wayfarer to the highest spiritual state possible, and the Second Valley, which is concerned with intellect and knowledge. The text suggests that one can achieve divine knowledge in the Second Valley only to the degree one has achieved the objective of the First Valley—completely overcoming one's will by fully aligning it with God's Will. In the First Valley, this is described as the dying of self, the slaying of evil qualities (“these four evil birds of prey”) that “after death the mystery of life may be unraveled” (§10). This highly challenging transformation of one's lower self can be achieved through God's assistance, which requires supplication to, remembrance, and even fear of God, as highlighted at the conclusion of the First Valley: “Likewise He saith, ‘And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves. Such men are

the evil doers’” (§14). Moving into the Second valley, we see that the theme of self-effacement and obedience to God's commandments is repeated and emphasized. Divine knowledge is bestowed only upon those who fear and obey God, wayfarers who have prepared their hearts for receiving such knowledge: “for He hath said concerning the guidance of wayfarers on this plane, ‘Fear ye God; God will teach you’, and again, ‘Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.’ Wherefore, one must make ready the receptacle and become worthy of the descent of heavenly bestowals, that the all-sufficing Cup-Bearer may give one to drink of the wine of bounty from the crystal chalice of mercy. ‘For this let the striving strive!’” (§18–19). Accordingly, treading the First Valley and transforming one's lower self to “the soul pleasing unto God” (§10) is arguably a pre-requisite for the wayfarer to become a receptacle ready for “the descent of heavenly bestowals” (§19) in the Second Valley—always bearing in mind that such transformation and change is not absolute but relative to the wayfarer's capacity.

Once we arrive at the Third Valley, the text explicitly points to the need for moving beyond the perfections gained in the first two valleys. As noted above, after Bahá'u'lláh has addressed the notions of self in the First Valley and intellect in the second, He writes of the station of love, which is the focus of the Third: “In this station, neither the reign of the intellect is sufficient nor

the rule of self” (§22). That intellect and self are not “sufficient” implies that there are qualities associated with each of them that have already been gained in the first two valleys but that are not adequate for the further progress to be made in this Third Valley. In other words, the Third Valley requires new qualities not attained in the first two valleys, perfections associated only with the virtue of love. Furthermore, in the Third Valley, referring to the wayfarer’s gaining of knowledge, Bahá’u’lláh mentions: “In this station, both instruction and apprenticeship are assuredly of no avail” and continues by quoting a poem: “The lovers’ teacher is the Loved One’s beauty, His face their lesson and their only book” (§25). The poem is followed by the wayfarer’s supplication to, “[a]llow this mote of knowledge hidden in my soul/To free itself of lowly clay and reach its goal” (§26). As such, in the context of the Third Valley’s discourse on love, the only purpose of the fruits of the Second Valley—what the wayfarers have learned through intellect—is to get nearer to the objective of this next Valley, the “countenance of love” (§20). Accordingly, learning, instruction, and knowledge attain their objective when joined with the agency of love; and this is contingent on detachment from the world of clay, the objective of the First Valley. In this sense one can say that the first two valleys are not complete by themselves; they need to fulfil their object with the aid of love.

At this juncture the reader familiar with *The Seven Valleys* might question

the idea of sequential progress from a knowledge-centered valley to one focused on love. After all, in that text, it is the Valley of Love that *precedes* the Valley of Knowledge. Addressing this question requires an exploration of The Seven Valley’s “Realm of Knowledge” (§23), comparing it with The Four Valley’s “station of the Intellect” (§15). Although they both address the theme of knowledge and have as their ultimate objective spiritual understanding and enlightenment, considering the two as equivalent stages of the wayfarers’ progress is problematic, as each seems to have a different point of departure and addresses a different aspect of the wayfarer’s knowledge. Even a brief comparison of the two paradigms reveals important differences. For example, the word “knowledge” in “the Realm of Knowledge” is a translation of the Arabic word *ma’rifat*, which is also rendered in some places in the Bahá’í Writings as “divine knowledge” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 46). Generally speaking, this word and others related to it—including *irfán*, translated in the Seven Valleys as “true knowledge” (§29), and those possessing such a knowledge, *‘arif* in its plural forms, often translated with phrases like “mystics” and “sages”<sup>25</sup>—are terms associated with mystical understanding in Persian literature. In contrast *‘aql*, the word for “intellect,” is associated with rational understanding. In

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25 “Mystics” (§45, §54), “mystic knowers” (§88, §63), “sages” (§53), and “the wise.” (§45)

that sense, “the Realm of Knowledge,” which pertains to spiritual and divine knowledge, entails the mystical quality of love of God. Mystical understanding is a condition of heart rather than mind: “The bliss of *mystic knowers* [*‘arifán*] can be only told from heart to heart” (§63). It can therefore be considered a higher level of understanding that goes beyond what we normally consider as knowledge.

But despite the differences between them, the two paradigms of wayfaring represented by “the Realm of Knowledge” and “the station of Intellect” both pursue the same objective, since mystical and rational approaches are both paths to God (and, as I have argued in my exploration of the four valleys, to the Manifestation of God). In both cases the wayfarers can make progress to the next valley. While in The Four Valleys, as previously discussed, intellect fulfills its objective in the realm of love, in The Seven Valleys love leads the wayfarer to the next stage, the divine knowledge and spiritual understanding.

Taking into consideration that knowledge can take different forms including “meagre reason,” rational understanding gained through intellect, and “Knowledge” as divine and mystical enlightenment, the relationship between these two vital facets of human reality and existence—knowledge and love—is doubtless more than we can hope to fully understand, and it is conceivable that, considered from different perspectives, either might be taken to precede the other. Therefore, we see

that even in the Seven Valleys—where we expect knowledge to supersede love—there are hints that love may supersede knowledge, as in much other mystical poetry and prose. Thus, in this text, we find references to the obliteration of rationality and reasoning by the consuming power of love: “and when the fire of love is ablaze, it burneth to ashes the harvest of reason” (§14). Yet, it is important to note that in this verse “reason” is the translation for *‘aql* (intellect). Therefore, as is the case with The Four Valleys, love supersedes “intellect.” Furthermore, in The Seven Valleys love is described as “[t]he leviathan” that “swalloweth the master of reason and slayeth the lord of knowledge,” (§20) and here also “reason” is a translation of *‘aql* or “intellect,” while “knowledge” is a translation of *dánish*, which refers to rationally acquired knowledge as opposed to mystical and divine “Knowledge” (*ma‘rifat*). Therefore, we observe that in The Seven Valleys “the Realm of Knowledge” or “True knowledge” (*ma‘rifat* and *‘irfán*)—spiritual and divine understanding—takes a superior position in relation to love; but throughout that text, when knowledge assumes the meaning of the rationality of the intellect, the relationship is reversed, consistent with what we observe in The Four Valleys.

Returning to the discussion of the sequential aspect of The Four Valleys, in relation to the wayfarers of the Third Valley Bahá'u'lláh writes: “They find all words of sense to be meaningless, and senseless words to be full of meaning” (§24). Love is, therefore, a realm

qualitatively different from the realm of intellect, as if it maintains its own logic, independent of ordinary comprehension. As such, the wayfarer of the Third Valley seeks the Beloved in a different manner, not relying on intellect.

In keeping with the sequential aspect of the valleys, we can note that the love of the Third Valley entails not only detachment from knowledge and learning but also complete forgetfulness of the self. The paradigm of perfecting one's self, as found in the First Valley, is replaced with the wayfarer's consuming love for the Perfections of the Beloved. "This plane demandeth pure love and unalloyed affection" (¶21). There are numerous passages in the Bahá'í Writings where the reality of love for God (or the Manifestation) is equated with complete forgetting of self. This is expressed in a number of Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words, including the following: "O Son of Man! If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee" (Arabic no. 7). Love, here, is a call to absolute devotion and full detachment from all that is not of God.

Of course, this sequential paradigm can be overstated. From one perspective, the death of self may be seen as a prerequisite for realizing true love of God. Yet, from another perspective (and taking into account the reality, pointed out in Shoghi Effendi's letter quoted above, that in this life we will never succeed in completely obliterating the self), that love is itself the great

motivating force that allows the self to be progressively conquered. From this perspective, while overcoming the lower self requires sacrifice, the divine Beloved not only demands sacrifice, but also makes sacrifice possible. According to the Bahá'í Writings, human beings have been created with the capacity to love their Creator: "I have breathed within thee a breath of My own Spirit, that thou mayest be My lover" (Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 19). The "Lodestone of hearts," the Manifestation of God, absorbs the wayfarer's heart and makes it its home: "My love has made in thee its home, it cannot be concealed. My light is manifest to thee, it cannot be obscured" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 20). Responding to the divine call, one's heart becomes the locus of the Beloved's love, making one able to make progress in the path of love. The presence of the Beloved in the wayfarer's heart assists the wayfarer to overcome attachments to the physical world. The possibility for such a felicitous condition of the heart needs to be recognized and acknowledged: "My love is in thee, know it, that thou mayest find Me near unto thee" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 10). We might surmise, then, that to the extent that the Self, Knowledge/Intellect, and Love of the first three valleys represent a sequence, it is one that can be repeated and iterated as the wayfarer makes progress in their unending spiritual journey.

Finally, we can consider how the Fourth Valley fits within the sequential paradigm. From a certain perspective,

this final valley can be viewed as the culmination of the previous three. The text of the Fourth Valley appears to indicate that progress in this last stage can be achieved to the degree that the wayfarer has attained the objectives of the first three valleys. The perfections gained in the first three valleys are concurrently emphasized and strengthened, and reach their ultimate fulfilment in this final valley.

In the First Valley, the wayfarer should have made progress toward the state of complete self-effacement, and total submission to God's Will, exemplified by the quality of fear of God (¶18). This fear of God leads to obedience to God's commandments and laws, which in turn leads to the transformation of the self and detachment from all else save God, including detachment from learnings that are merely a source of pride:

With renunciation, not with grammar's rules, one must be armed:

Be nothing, then, and cross this sea unharmed (¶13).

Likewise, we read regarding the Fourth Valley: "In truth, the wayfarer who journeyeth unto God . . . will never reach his heavenly home unless his hands are empty of such worldly things as are cherished by men. 'And he that feareth not God, God shall make him to fear all things; whereas all things fear him who feareth God'" (¶30).

The Second Valley, which is the station of "the true standard of knowledge"

(¶18), addresses the knowledge gained through God's guidance and bestowals: "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth" (¶18). True knowledge is therefore an emanation of divine guidance. Likewise, we observe that the Fourth Valley concerns "the secret of divine guidance" (¶28). This elucidation at the beginning of the Fourth Valley is in fact in one respect the continuation of the closing part of the Third Valley which addresses the joining of the wayfarer's knowledge with the higher, divine level of knowledge: "Allow this mote of knowledge hidden in my soul / To free itself of lowly clay and reach its goal. / And grant this drop of wisdom that / Thou gavest me To be at last united with Thy mighty sea." (¶26)

As we see in the opening sentence of the Fourth Valley, the spiritual station of "inmost heart" (¶28) is associated with God's guidance, "the secret of guidance" (¶28). This station is, however, a mystery that transcends common knowledge. It cannot be readily explained in words and if revealed it will lead to the persecution of its revealer. In short, then, the theme of knowledge, which is the focus of the Second Valley, is further developed in the Third and Fourth Valleys.

The relationship between the theme of the Fourth Valley and knowledge can be better understood by exploring the notion of inmost heart (*fu'ád*), a culminating station that entails both the fulfilment of treading the path of love and the wayfarer's attainment to the

highest level of knowledge, a knowledge that is gained through self-effacement as will be discussed below. In that sense, the inmost heart is an exalted reality integrating perfections gained in previous valleys.

We can next consider how the Third Valley finds its culmination in the Fourth. Love, the theme of the Third Valley, is a condition of the heart: the attraction of the heart to the object of love, the Manifestation of God. Therefore, the Third Valley is “the abode of the Lodestone of hearts,” the plane where the heart of the wayfarer is drawn to the Beloved. Yet, the Fourth Valley is the station of “the throne of the inmost heart” (¶28). The wayfarer entering the Fourth Valley has already attained the presence of the Beloved and therefore the objective of love has been achieved, as we see in the opening sentence of this valley: “If the mystic knowers be among them that have attained THE BEAUTY OF THE BELOVED, this station is the throne of the inmost heart and the secret of divine guidance” (¶28). As such, love is inadequate to play any role in this last valley: “This is the realm of pure awareness and utter self-effacement. Not even love can find a way to this plane, nor doth affection have a place therein. Wherefore is it said: ‘Love is a veil betwixt the lover and the beloved.’ Here love becometh but an obstructing veil, and aught save the Friend but a curtain” (¶34). Beyond even love, “this station is the throne of the inmost heart”; thus, in addition to its reference to the Manifestation discussed above, the “inmost heart” can

refer to the most perfect and befitting station of the heart, the highest level of the heart’s enlightenment and the realization of the ultimate progress of the wayfarer. This is a meaning for “inmost heart” offered by the Báb in one of His writings, a meaning that is closer to the Shaykhí (Rámíhr 394) and Sufi traditions. He defines it as the ultimate degree of understanding, illumination, and insight a human being can develop: “And know thou that God—glorified be He—hath made His most great gift to man to be the perception of the inmost heart. Indeed the inmost heart is man’s greatest susceptibility” (Mázandarání 107). Likewise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in His interpretation of the Qur’anic verse, “His heart falsified not what he saw” (53:11) considers the heart to be the highest standard of understanding (*Makátib* 112). Comparing various standards for human understanding He explains: “But, the veritable divine standard, that which is never fallacious nor fails and which comprehends universal realities and sublime inner meanings, is verily the standard of the inmost heart . . . for it is indeed the illumination of the spreading rays of the lights of divine bestowal, and the mystery of the All Merciful, and the revelation of spirit, and the heavenly sign. It verily is the eternal bounty and the manifest effulgence and the most great gift” (112–13).

It is thus possible to view the Fourth Valley as the highest level of enlightenment for the wayfarer, the ultimate level of spiritual progress. From this sequential perspective, it is

the culmination of all qualities gained in the previous valleys, the end of the wayfarer's journey.

This view of the Fourth Valley as the completion of the journey is suggested by the reference to Joseph which, in addition to hinting at the nearness of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, can also be understood as alluding to the wayfarer's nearness to the ultimate objective of mystic wayfaring. In this interpretation, Jacob's sensing the fragrance of the garment of Joseph, which signaled Joseph's return home and reunion with his father, alludes to the felicitous completion of the wayfarer's journey. In short, from this perspective, the Fourth Valley is the culmination of the wayfarer's spiritual journey, and in that sense it is a state superior to previous valleys.

Although we can perceive a degree of sequential progress in The Four Valleys, this characteristic is stronger in The Seven Valleys, where Bahá'u'lláh clearly makes entrance to each valley conditional upon the successful completion of the previous valley. For instance, on the wayfarer's transition from the Valley of Wonderment to the next valley we read: "After scaling the high summits of wonderment, the wayfarer cometh to the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness" (§76). Yet, regardless of the priority we can assign to the sequential or the parallel nature of The Four Valleys, both paradigms are concerned with assisting the wayfarer in treading the path of spiritual progress towards the recognition of the station of the Manifestation of

God, as a careful reading of each of the valleys shows.

#### THE EXEMPLARY WAYFARER AND THE PATH OF PERFECTION

While we can say that the primary purpose of *The Four Valleys* is to explain the station of the Manifestation of God, the text can also be seen as a guide for the spiritual progress of the wayfarer treading the mystical path—or, in the context of the Bahá'í Writings, a believer in the Faith who has recognized the Manifestation of God and is striving to deepen this recognition and acquire spiritual perfections. Certain allusions made in the text of *The Four Valleys* can in one sense be understood as referring to what we may call "exemplary" wayfarers, those who have undertaken their spiritual journey in an exemplary manner. For instance, we read about "companions" (*aṣḥáb*): "In describing these companions He saith: 'They speak not till He hath spoken, and act according to His commandment.'"<sup>26</sup> Or when we come across the term "men" (*rijál*): "Such indeed are those whom He hath extolled as 'men whom neither merchandise nor traffic beguile from the remembrance of God'" (§17).

References to the idea of being spiritually exemplary can be found elsewhere in the Writings of the Central Figures and the Guardian. Shoghi Effendi, for instance, uses the term

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26 This elucidation can also be understood as referring to the Manifestations of God.

“perfect souls” (*nufús-i-kámilih*) to refer to those who demonstrate through their actions truths that would be difficult to prove in words:

[The believers] should beyond all else through their conduct and actions demonstrate that divine promises are irrevocable and pre-ordained and heavenly glad-tidings are manifest and fulfilled, and thereafter, by means of utterances and proofs. Unless perfect souls step into the arena and become centers of attraction in every assemblage, proving this matter to the men of wisdom among nations would be a formidable task. Yet, if the male and female believers make such perfections manifest, there would be no need for utterance and persuasion; their very acts are proofs and guarantors of the protection, preservation and might and power of the Cause of God. (*Tawqí 'át-i-Mubárakih* 170)

Shoghi Effendi's use of the term “perfect souls” must be considered in light of the Bahá'í understanding of perfection as an ideal to strive for. The believer in this path makes degrees of progress through personal effort and God's assistance. To the degree that individuals recognize the Manifestation of God and act in accordance with His will, God's mercy encompasses them, His grace fills their heart, and their earthly and physical existence is transformed to reflect heavenly bestowals. This is a process of moving toward the

ideal of the exemplary wayfarer, the qualities defined in the Bahá'í Writings.

The Four Valleys specifies four paths to spiritual growth and explains the ultimate objective of each of these paths—a particular aspect of the Manifestation of God. While the paths are meant to be trodden by human beings, no individual can achieve the paths' ultimate objective, which refers to the Manifestation of God, a Reality beyond human reach. However, the perfection to which the human *can* attain in this “Day of God” is remarkable: true believers can even attain the station of the lesser prophets of the past: “In confirmation of the exalted rank of the true believer, referred to by Bahá'u'lláh, He reveals the following: ‘The station which he who hath truly recognized this Revelation will attain is the same as the one ordained for such prophets of the house of Israel as are not regarded as Manifestations “endowed with constancy”’ (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 111).<sup>27</sup> Bahá'u'lláh also proclaims that “[t]he day is approaching when God will have, by an act of His Will, raised up a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God, the All-Powerful, the Self-Subsisting” (109–110).

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27 The exalted spiritual station of such believers is, of course, infinitely below the station of the Manifestations of God “endowed with constancy” such as Moses, Buddha, Christ, Muḥammad and Bahá'u'lláh. As discussed earlier in this paper, the Manifestation is an ontologically distinct being Who represents God Himself in the realm of existence.

What, then, exactly can be meant by the exalted spiritual rank ordained for the true believer, and how can one strive to approach such a station? In the Sufi context, the station of highly spiritual figures, known by a variety of titles such as *Shaykh* (spiritual authority) and *Qutb* (the center and axis of spiritual energy) has often been associated with possessing esoteric knowledge, performing miracles (Schimmel 199–206), and undertaking extreme ascetic austerities, as is well recorded in the history of Sufism. In the context of The Four Valleys, would spiritual advancement mean making progress by treading a certain valley—seeking perfection in self-effacement, or in knowledge, in love for God, or in the enlightenment of one's heart—as a purely parallel model of The Four Valleys might imply? Perhaps we can find the answer to this question in 'Abdu'l-Bahá' statement that, “a Bahá'í is one who embodyeth all the perfections” (*Selections* 143). In that sense spiritual perfection means harmoniously combining qualities mentioned in all four valleys. Wayfaring entails elevating the self to a station pleasing to God, nurturing the intellectual faculty, enhancing the capacity for loving God, and finally acquiring a pure, enlightened and insightful heart.

In fact, studying The Four Valleys in light of the totality of the Bahá'í Revelation reveals that focusing on a single aspect of human faculties such as improving one's self (the theme of the First Valley), intellect and knowledge

(the theme of the Second Valley), or love (the focus of the Third Valley), is not conducive to getting nearer to the height of spiritual progress delineated in the Fourth Valley, the valley that can be considered as the culmination of the valleys, the final destination pertaining to those that have “attained the Beauty of the Beloved” (¶28). We can observe that in the Bahá'í Writings the four planes of endeavor have not been separated. In the opening paragraphs of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* the essential qualities of a believer are described as the combined and integrated condition of recognition of the Manifestation of God (¶1) and obedience to Him as a token of love (¶4). Recognition entails knowledge of the Revelation, a theme explained in the Second Valley. Obedience to laws is a prerequisite for transforming the “self commanding to evil” to the self “pleasing unto God,” the ultimate objective of the First Valley, but such obedience should be out of love for the Manifestation of God, the quality stipulated in the Third Valley. In that sense, what we read in the opening verses of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is consistent with the understanding that the four valleys are not distinctly separate paths to spiritual progress and that the treading of one valley by itself is not what Bahá'u'lláh prescribes. A prayer by 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides an example for such guidance. He portrays His own condition as being the *Majnún* (“the mad one”) of love, not desiring any intellect and wisdom, only wishing for the bestowals of love. Yet, He prays to God to grant Him a state of moderation.

Addressing the need to strike a balance between love and intellect He writes: “Neither is the excessive intellect and learning that prevents the diffusion of the fragrances of God praiseworthy, nor is the shackle-breaking insanity prized. O God, bestow a state of moderation” (*Majmú‘iyi-Munájathá* 41). In addition to His words and expositions, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “Perfect Exemplar” (*Mathal-i-A‘lá*) has, by His life and conduct, set standards for the path the believers need to follow, demonstrating perfections in all aspects of life. And, indeed, Bahá’ís can reflect on how fortunate they are to not only have been given guidance, in the inspired and life-giving words of the Manifestation, as to what an exemplary wayfarer and “perfect soul” must be, but also the living Example of perfection in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

This concept—not only making progress in each of the faculties and capacities endowed by God, but also integrating these perfections—can be extended and applied to the conditions and nature of progress in social systems. Like individuals, small or large social units and institutions such as families, communities, nations, and civilizations can acquire perfections associated with each of the valleys and, furthermore, harmonize and integrate qualities developed in these different but interrelated paths.

An adequate exploration of the social implications of the four valleys as paths and stages of spiritual development must be left to further research, but a few examples can help illuminate

some possibilities. For instance, in our parallel model of the Four Valleys and in relation to making progress in the Second Valley, intellectual and academic institutions can consider paying stronger attention to contemplating and investigating metaphysical concepts and spiritual questions, in parallel with their exploration of the material aspects of the world of existence. Limited and fragmented “meagre reason” (¶15) can expand its horizon and benefit from the aid and bestowals of the “universal divine Intellect” (¶15). Since the Age of Enlightenment, the study of metaphysical concepts has been decreasing and is even despised in some academic circles. Furthermore, the focus of intellectual investigation has turned toward the hard sciences and technology, while various fields in the humanities have adopted the quantitative and objective methodologies of the hard sciences, leading to a narrow view of reality. Likewise, at the civilizational level, the presently dominant positivism and rationalism, and their associated materialistic philosophies, are symptoms of an undue focus on the physical at the expense of the spiritual, to the point of neglect or even denial of spiritual realities. While *The Four Valleys* does not explicitly address the struggle against these powerful trends, the individual wayfarer might heed the call of: “For this let the striving strive!” (¶19)

A believer in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh can surely anticipate that through its potency the existing forms of scholarship and investigation will be transformed to incorporate spiritual

elements. Yet, we can only imagine what forms the intellectual endeavors of a spiritually enlightened civilization of the future, informed by the Revelation, will take. As we glimpse current areas of inquiry that seem to have some resonance with that Revelation, we might tentatively conjecture that this future civilization will incorporate, among other things, a spiritually informed study of human nature and psychology, holistic healthcare and medicine, ecology, education in ethics, morals and piety, and a new spiritually-based world order in which peace studies and related practical explorations move beyond a purely materialistic and limited view of the universe and humanity.

Beyond the transformation of intellectual endeavors themselves, there is a crucial need in contemporary society for the integration of the intellectual faculty with other capacities. For instance, within the institution of marriage, communication and mutual intellectual understanding between spouses, and with their children, needs to be accompanied by selflessness and ethical and pious life practices (virtues acquired in the First Valley), along with a love among family members that is grounded in the love of God, rendering it unshakable and eternal. These three elements of intellectual capacity, piety, and love, can synergistically facilitate a family life informed, enriched, and safeguarded by the teachings of the Manifestation of God. In the absence of such integration, not only will the peaceful, nurturing, and supporting

environment necessary for the flourishing of the intellectual faculty be hampered or largely eliminated, but fragmented and materialistic education, void of ethics and high motives, will become an obstacle to unity, happiness, service to humanity, and spiritual growth. Yet, we understand from The Four Valleys that such an unfortunate condition in the family does not eliminate the responsibility for spiritual wayfaring by the individual family members; rather they might see it as an opportunity to embark on a spiritual journey. There is much work to be done in exploring the possibilities for applying The Four Valleys' explanation of the individual wayfarer's progress to the transformation of various levels of social systems, as well as in learning about the dynamics of the relationship between the two.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Four Valleys, using the language and terminologies of Sufi discourse and tradition, describes four types of wayfarers each following a certain path for getting nearer to God—which, in light of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, means nearness to the Manifestation of God; and in that sense in each of the valleys the final objective to strive for is a certain aspect of the Reality of the Manifestation of God. As the Writings make clear, there is no end to the wayfarer's journey as the perfections of the Manifestation of God are beyond humankind's full grasp. In that sense, struggle with one's lower

nature, “the insistent self” (Qur’án 12:53, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 259), needs to continue throughout one’s life. Accordingly, as long as one lives in the material world, one should not expect to achieve a permanent victory; the wayfarer must always be watchful for the temptations of the lower self. Equally, knowledge and spiritual insight are infinitely vast and cannot be fully attained. Likewise, one can always intensify one’s love for God and search for ways to demonstrate that love. Finally, although one can recognize the station of the Manifestation of God, the exemplary condition referred to in the Fourth Valley as “pure awareness and utter self-effacement,” (¶34) is an ideal, never to be attained, that we must strive for and draw increasingly close to. In principle, one can identify with a certain type of wayfarer and pursue the exemplary model set for that type by Bahá'u'lláh. Such wayfaring in a particular valley corresponds with the parallel model of The Four Valleys.

Yet, in addition to describing four different and parallel approaches to God, the valleys demonstrate a sequential and integrative character to a degree, and we observe a progression taking place in moving from one valley to the next. In that sense The Four Valleys depicts a narrative for the spiritual journey of the wayfarer, a journey that culminates in the Fourth Valley, signifying the utmost progress and development of the wayfarer. But this progress is only possible through the recognition of the station of the Manifestation of God. While the Fourth

Valley alludes to the station of the ideal exemplar wayfarer it is primarily referring to the station of the Manifestation of God at this specific time in history, the advent of a new Revelation leading humanity to the peak of its spiritual development.

I have briefly pointed out how the paradigm of the wayfarers’ progress in the Four Valleys can help us understand the requisites for progress in social systems, from the fundamental level of the family unit to the level of humankind’s civilizations. My understanding is that The Four Valleys, in appearance a mystical treatise, has embedded within it the nucleus and foundation for a new global civilization unique in human history, a divine plan for humankind delineated in other Writings of the Faith. What on its surface appears to be a marvelous poetic rendering of the mystical Sufi discourse can in fact be viewed as the first streaks of the dawn of a new civilization. In that sense, the account of the journey of the mystic wayfarers of The Four Valleys can inform the envisioning of a teleological and evolutionary metanarrative for human existence and history, which can be the subject of further research.

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Mangroves and Rocks  
in Biscayne Bay  
pinhole photography  
RUDY UMANS

# A Discourse on Bahá'í Theology: A Treatise by Dr. 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí on God and Revelation<sup>1</sup>

Translation and annotation by  
VARGHA BOLODO-TAEFI

## INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of the Bahá'í Faith, Iran has produced notable Bahá'í scholars, such as Áqá Muḥammad-i-Qá'iní, surnamed Nabil-i-Akbar, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání, surnamed Abu'l-Faḍá'il,<sup>2</sup> Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil-i-Mázindaráni,<sup>3</sup> and 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávári.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these

1 I would like to thank Elham Afnan, Monica Bolodo-Taefi, Omid Ghaemmaghami, and Todd Smith for their encouragement and valuable advice.

2 The author of weighty volumes such as *Fará'id*, *Faṣlu'l-Khiṭáb*, and *Burhán-i-Lámi*, among several others.

3 The author and compiler of such reference material as the nine volumes of *Tárikh-i-Zuhúru'l-Haqq*, the five volumes of *Asráru'l-Áthár*, and the four volumes of *Amr va Khaalq*.

4 The author of such celebrated volumes as *Ayyám-i-Tis'ih*, *Muḥáḍarát*, *Qámús-i-Íqán*, and *Rahiq-i-Makhtúm*.

scholars were educated in Islamic seminaries and trained in Islamic theology, Islamic law and jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic scholastic logic, away from the influence of modern thought, Western philosophy, non-classical logic, and the more refined branches of knowledge, such as literature and arts. Owing to this educational background and the requirements of the age they lived in, the fruits of their Bahá'í scholarship are invaluable compilations of the Bahá'í Writings, dictionaries, commentaries, apologetic works, and historical studies.

In 1922, at a time and in an environment in which the approach to Bahá'í scholarship was heavily influenced by seminary culture, the distinguished scholar and researcher Dr. 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí was born. A prolific author and illustrious personage, Dávúdí was well loved by the contemporary Bahá'í community of Iran. He was abducted and martyred in 1979. Dávúdí was learned in Persian and Arabic literature, achieved a complete mastery of French, and was eminently well-versed in different branches of knowledge and approaches to study and research—especially in the academic study of Islamic, Eastern, and Western philosophies, Islamic, formal, and non-classical logic, scholastic theology, and mysticism (Dávúdí, *Insán* 32, 38–40; Dávúdí, “Hamsaram” 25). His knowledge of all the disciplines of philosophy, as well as his academic approach to the study of the Bahá'í Writings, allowed him to advance Bahá'í scholarship

beyond apologetics, lexical commentary, and historical studies to new heights of conceptual and philosophical analysis of Bahá'í themes and teachings. The legacy he has bequeathed for posterity is his skillful analysis of the philosophical, theological, and ethical tenets of the Bahá'í Faith in light of the philosophical thinking of both the East and the West. Dr. Dávúdí's profundity of erudition, knowledge of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, academic rigor in his studies, stalwart defense of the Faith, steadfastness in the Covenant, contribution to the development of the Iranian population, and nobility of character, earn him a unique place in the history of Bahá'í scholarship in the Persian language.

Dávúdí was the very first individual in Iranian history to earn a doctorate degree in philosophy after the program was instituted in the 1950s (Dávúdí, "Hamsaram" 25). In 1964, he joined the faculty of Tehran University and taught courses in introduction to philosophy, history of medieval philosophy, and metaphysics (Dávúdí, *Ulúhiyyat* 8). He later served as the head of the Department of Philosophy at Tehran University. While teaching there, he published a Persian translation of Aristotle's *On the Soul*,<sup>5</sup> the first two volumes of Émile Bréhier's *Histoire de la philosophie* on ancient and medieval philosophy,<sup>6</sup> as well as

Léon Meynard's *La Connaissance*,<sup>7</sup> and authored a volume on the works of the philosophers of the Peripatetic school, from Aristotle to Avicenna, on soul and reason.<sup>8</sup> A collection of his essays dealing with such diverse subjects as the concept of soul in Al-Fárábí's thought, a comparative study of the philosophies of Aristotle and Avicenna, ancient Greek theories of spirit and psyche, the sophists, knowledge of self, metaphysical anxiety, and a critique of infinite regress arguments, was also published in Iran under the title *Maqálat-i-Dávúdí*.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to his abduction in 1979, he had completed the translation into Persian of Étienne Gilson's *L'esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale*.<sup>10</sup> This masterfully eloquent translation, which was eventually published eight years after Dávúdí's disappearance, won the highest national best-book award (Dávúdí, "Hamsaram" 26–28). In a society in which a person's avowed belief in the Bahá'í Faith came at the price of his or her basic human rights, the bestowal of such a recognition to an individual who was well known for being a Bahá'í and had been persecuted for his belief is an undeniable testament to the caliber of his work. He is recognized as a first-class philosopher of his age and among

5 *Darbáriy-i-Nafs*. Tehran University, 1349 S.H. (1970–71).

6 *Tárikh-i-Falsafih*. Tehran University, 1352 S.H. (1973–74).

7 *Shínásá'í va Hastí*. Dihkhudá, 1351 S.H. (1972–73).

8 *'Aql dar Hikmat-i-Mashhá'*: *Az Arastú tá Ibn-i-Siná*. Dihkhudá, 1349 S.H. (1971).

9 *Khárazmí*, 1389 S.H. (1389–90).

10 *Rúh-i-Falsafiy-i-Qurún-i-Vustá*. Tehran University, 1366 S.H. (1987–88).

a small number of intellectuals in Iran with training in both traditional and modern philosophy (Nasr 325). Many later Iranian philosophers were influenced by his thoughts and works.

Dávudí served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran from 1974 until his abduction in November 1979, including as its secretary for a number of years (Dávudí, *Insán* 33). Through his service on the Bahá'í national committee for literature review, the national publication board, and the national committee for research and publication, he was instrumental in the publication of the multiple volumes of such notable collections of Bahá'í Writings as *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá* and *Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* (collections of Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, respectively), as well as the scholarly series *Mu'táli'iy-i-Ma'árif-i-Bahá'í* that introduced the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith.

Dávudí's paramount service to the Faith—which greatly impacted the Iranian Bahá'í community, especially its youth—was his numerous scholarly lectures on the Bahá'í teachings and writings, in deepening seminars and summer schools. His contribution to fostering a culture of Bahá'í scholarship in Iran reached its peak with the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies in 1976. The National Spiritual Assembly of Iran created this institute in fulfillment of a goal of the Five Year Plan (1974–9)<sup>11</sup>

to train a number of capable Bahá'í youth in the research and study of the Bahá'í teachings, as well as traditional religious and philosophical themes (Dávudí, *Insán* 35). The Assembly entrusted the Institute's formation, planning, supervision, and administration to 'Alí-Murád Dávudí and Badí'u'lláh Faríd. In this institute, besides his other responsibilities, Dávudí taught various themes and works of philosophy and mysticism. Thanks to Dávudí's scholarship and academic standing, as well as his tireless and systematic efforts, and particularly through the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies, the field of Bahá'í studies reached a new milestone of scholarly development and academic rigor.

Dávudí wrote numerous essays on the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the Bahá'í teachings, as well as on Bahá'í ethics. Some of these essays, which address such themes as the station of the human being, the human soul, non-involvement in politics, free will, the harmony of science and religion, the unity of humankind, Bahá'í education, religious truth, Bahá'í discourse, history, knowledge of God, and the concept of

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Effendi devised a series of global plans of varying durations which derive their mandate from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. The aim of these plans—and of the subsequent ones, devised and guided by the Universal House of Justice since its establishment in 1963—is to develop the capacity of the Bahá'ís and their communities and institutions to strive for the betterment of humanity.

11 Beginning in 1937, Shoghi

Manifestation, have been published by Vahid Rafati in the volumes *Insán dar Á'in-i-Bahá'í* (1987), *Maqálát va Rasá'il dar Mabáhiṭh-i-Mutanavvi'ih* (1993), *Ulúhiyyat va Mazharíyyat* (1996), and *Malakút-i-Vujúd* (1998). Among them, *Insán dar Á'in-i-Bahá'í* has been translated into English by Riaz Masrouf as *Human Station in the Bahá'í Faith* (2013).

Dávúdí also delivered countless lectures on various themes and writings, the audio recordings of many of which have been preserved for posterity. The topics of these lectures include the existence of God, the human soul, religion, the Word of God, unity in diversity, wisdom, materialism, freedom, the Holy Spirit, ethics, prayer, the Tablet of Aḥmad, the Tablet of the World (the Lawḥ-i-Dunyá), the Tablet to Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, and the Tablet to Auguste Forel.

Through his service on the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies, as well as his numerous lectures and essays on Bahá'í themes, Dávúdí made an unparalleled contribution to the development of Bahá'í scholarship, thought, and culture in Iran and raised a generation of future Bahá'í scholars.

In addition to his erudition, Dávúdí is undoubtedly remembered for his consummate power of expression and exemplary mastery of utterance by which he unfolded the meaning of abstruse concepts and obscure questions with inimitable simplicity and eloquence (Dávúdí, *Ulúhiyyat* 13). His writings, translations, and audiotaped lectures attest to the graceful flow of his thought

and logic, the clarity of his utterance, and the conciseness, rigor, and dignity of his expression. He elucidated concepts, adduced proofs, and unveiled meanings free from any superfluity, exaggeration, ambiguity, and prejudice. He was often only informed of the topic of his lecture once he arrived at the recording session organized by the audio-visual committee of the National Spiritual Assembly. Occasionally, after a topic was decided in advance, he would arrive at the recording studio only to be advised of a change of topic. That he delivered many of his lectures extemporaneously, without any notes or prior knowledge of the topic, yet with exceptional quality of exposition, eloquence, flow of thought, and choice of words, made his presentation of the subjects all the more awe-inspiring (Dávúdí, *Ulúhiyyat* 14).

His outstanding qualities, which also evidently characterized his writings and speeches, were his humility, dignity, and fairness. He was a gentle, elegant, modest, demure, unobtrusive, accommodating, humane, benevolent, responsible, dedicated, graceful, unassuming, pleasant, eloquent, and courteous soul (Dávúdí, *Insán* 43, 45; *Ulúhiyyat* 9). He truly exemplified this passage from Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom:

Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are

detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. (*Tablets* 143)

Dávúdí dedicated his entire life to the service of the Bahá'í Faith. His education, scholarship, knowledge of the Faith, experience, and insight culminated in his defense of the Faith, its teachings, and its followers, as well as in consoling and inspiring the persecuted Bahá'í community of Iran, in a most critical and perilous period in the development of the Faith in that country (Dávúdí, *Insán* 33, 47).

Owing to the dominant prejudice against the followers of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in Iran, their contributions to the development of thought and scholarship in all fields of knowledge have been almost completely left out of all historical accounts. Dávúdí's contribution to the development of philosophy in Iran is no exception to this rule (Dávúdí, *Ulúhiyyat* 9–10; Dávúdí, “Hamsaram” 26–28). It is worth remembering that he produced almost all his Bahá'í works, essays, and lectures in the midst of the violent prelude to the Islamic revolution in Iran, while he was serving as the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly and occupied with the imperatives of the circumstances. That many of the fruits of Dávúdí's intellectual activities were produced in a turbulent period of intense clamor, unrest, and toil—in the absence of the peace and tranquility requisite for the flourishing of

philosophical and mystical thought—is especially poignant.

Alas, the beleaguered and oppressed community of the Bahá'ís of Iran was robbed of its stalwart and erudite defender in such a grave period in its evolution. The opponents of the Faith who vainly saw in his elimination a great victory for themselves and an irreparable defeat for the Bahá'í community, kidnapped him on 11 November 1979 as he walked in a park near his house. He has been presumed a victim of state execution (Dávúdí, *Insán* 48; Dávúdí, “Hamsaram” 22). Aged fifty-seven at the time of his martyrdom, he was only at the beginning of his path of philosophy and in the springtime of his life of scholarship. His execution was a deplorable injustice and grievous cruelty towards the world of philosophy and scholarship.

Five months later, at Riḍván 1980, when the Iranian Bahá'í community elected its National Spiritual Assembly, Dr. ‘Alí-Murád Dávúdí was elected again—in absentia. A grateful community thus expressed its love and appreciation to a hero (Dávúdí, *Insán* 49).

What follows is a translation and annotation of a treatise on Bahá'í theology by Dr. ‘Alí-Murád Dávúdí. This treatise explores some central themes in Bahá'í theology and introduces eloquently such fundamental concepts as the absolute transcendence of God, apophatic theology, the knowledge of God, the revelation of God, emanation and manifestation, and the divine names and attributes. Aside from the

Bahá'í authoritative Writings, a single document that exclusively introduces the Bahá'í view on God has been hitherto absent from the English Bahá'í literature and it is hoped that this collection will contribute to a discourse on divinity. In this work, Dávudí liberally cites passages from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith to elaborate each theme. As a result, the following translation features heretofore unpublished provisional translations of over fifty passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as well as from the utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Since the inception of the Bahá'í Faith, including during Bahá'u'lláh's own lifetime, Bahá'ís have occasionally held different understandings of the station of Bahá'u'lláh, with some considering His human Temple to be the appearance of the invisible and inaccessible Essence of God. An aspect of the systematic persecution to which the Bahá'í community was subjected in Iran, particularly during Dávudí's lifetime, was an assault levelled against its teachings about God and the station of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís were often accused of denying God or believing Bahá'u'lláh to be God. Dávudí's commentaries on the foundations of Bahá'í theology in this treatise and in others about the concept and the station of the Manifestation of God were, and remain, invaluable contributions toward resolving such instances of misconception and campaigns of disinformation. In his other essays about the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation, Dávudí demonstrates how this concept resolves

historical paradoxes between scriptural promise of attaining the presence of God and His transcendence and inaccessibility, and between His universal revelation in all created things and His essential separation from them.

In addition to the exemplary works of the Bahá'í scholars named earlier, there is a wealth of outstanding literature of excellent academic rigor in Persian by numerous Bahá'í scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as 'Azízu'lláh Mişbáh, Muḥammad-Báqir Húshyár, Khusraw Muhandisí, Kamálu'd-Dín Bakhtávar, Muḥammad Afnán, Shapour Rassekh, Vahid Rafati, Nader Saiedi, and Farídu'd-Dín Rádmíhr, among many others. Once translated into English, these works will no doubt enrich the intellectual life of the entire Bahá'í world and contribute to public discourse in various disciplines. Their translation will also unlock the possibility of greater and richer exchange between Persian and non-Persian Bahá'í scholarship, allowing the finest contributions of both to be brought into fruitful dialogue.

The original-language treatise translated and annotated here was first published as "Mabáníy-i-'Aqá'id-i-Ulúhíyyat va Tawhíd: part 1," in *Muṭá-li'iy-i-Ma'árif-i-Bahá'í* 1 (1973–74). It was later republished as part of a collection of Dávudí's essays on the Essence of God and His Manifestation, titled *Ulúhíyyat va Mazharíyyat* (60–133). The translation of Dávudí's treatise is in the body of the text; the translator's annotation appears in the in-text citation and footnotes.

GOD'S SANCTITY  
AND TRANSCENDENCE

Bahá'ís believe in a God that has ever been, and will always be, inaccessible and exalted above creation. He does not descend into any world which is created by Him and which is, therefore, not of His kind. We, likewise, hold that the followers of other religions, if they confess the reality of their own religions, should also recognize God in this manner;<sup>12</sup> otherwise, they would err and stray from the straight path.<sup>13</sup> And since God is beyond descent and habitation, return and ascent are, equally, unworthy of Him and incompatible

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12 For formulations of the concept of God's inaccessibility and exaltation in other religions, see Aquinas 30; Saint Augustine, book I, chs. 1 and 4, book VII, ch. 1; Qur'án 42:11, 37:180, and 112:1-4; Al-Kindí's "On First Philosophy" ("Kitábu Al-Kindí ila'l-Mu'tašim-i-bi'lláh") 1:4, published in Abú-Rídah 160-161; Avicenna 40-66; *Al-Futúhátu'l-Makkíyyih*, vol. 1, ch. 3, pp. 144-153 and vol. 3, ch. 172, pp. 434-439; *Fuṣúṣu'l-Hikam* 48-56.

13 It is to this same principle—the oneness of the underlying foundations of the divine religions—that the following excerpts from the Tablet of Aḥmad refer: "O people, if ye deny these verses, by what proof have ye believed in God? Produce it, O assemblage of false ones. . . . Be thou assured in thyself that verily, he who turns away from this Beauty hath also turned away from the Messengers of the past and showeth pride towards God from all eternity to all eternity" (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers* 211-12).

with His station.<sup>14</sup> He does not become incarnate in anything.<sup>15</sup> No relationship or tie of direct intercourse binds Him to His creation.<sup>16</sup> Any mention of separation and union, or proximity and remoteness in relation to God is merely figurative. No one can choose a path towards Him as no sign can indicate the direction of His presence or guide His creation to Him. His presence is free from all notions of time and space. For this reason, where God is intended, "seat," "throne," or "court"—in fact all description—should indeed be avoided;<sup>17</sup> yet speech is unavoidable. It is,

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14 See *Gleanings* no. 19; The Seven Valleys; *Some Answered Questions* nos. 27, 37, 54, 59, and 82.

15 Having interpreted the figurative language of verses such as John 1:14, John 14:10, John 1:1, 1 John 4:2, and 1 Timothy 3:16 literally, Christian theologians declared "incarnation"—the belief that God became flesh, assumed a human nature, and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God—to be a doctrine of the Church. Mainstream Judaism, as well as Islamic philosophy, scholastic theology, and mysticism completely reject incarnation.

16 See *Gleanings* nos. 26 and 27.

17 The Throne of God is a common concept in many Abrahamic religions. Many understand the references to the Throne of God in Judaism (for example 1 Kings 22:19, Isaiah 6:1, Ezekiel 1:26, and Daniel 7:9), Christianity (such as Matthew 23:22 and Revelation 4), Islam (for example Qur'án 10:3, 11:7, 23:116, and 2:255, known as the *Áyatu'l-Kursi*), and the Bahá'í Faith (such as the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* pars. 40, 73, 86, and 89, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,

therefore, out of this consideration that His Chosen Ones speak of “the Seat of eternal holiness,” “the Habitation of glory,” or “the Throne of majesty” with reference to God. His Essence, however, is eternally unseen and forever concealed within His own Being. To liken Him to anything or view anything as being of His kind is unbecoming.

We must, inevitably, recognize God as a necessary, simple,<sup>18</sup> single, nondelimited,<sup>19</sup> and incorporeal Being; otherwise, there would be no difference between Him and all other created things—which are contingent, compounded, many, delimited, and corporeal—just as we would have no need to accept Him or believe in His existence. In order to confess His simple reality, therefore, we must recognize that no constituent elements have come together within Him.<sup>20</sup> To declare His

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Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, and many Bahá'í prayers) to be allegorical rather than describing a physical dwelling-place of God.

18 Throughout history, major religions have often confessed divine simplicity in apophatic theological terms—seeking to understand God by negation, by what He is not, while sanctifying Him from all names and attributes.

19 In *Al-Futúhátu'l-Makkíyyih*, vol. 4, ch. 272, pp. 313–315, describing God's nondelimitation, Ibnu'l 'Arabí explains that God is infinite and absolute, undefined and indefinable, indistinct and indistinguishable, whereas the world of creation is distinct, defined, and limited.

20 Bahá'u'lláh's commentary on the Islamic philosophical doctrine of “The uncompounded reality is all things”

singleness, we must reject any notion of plurality in relation to God.<sup>21</sup> In order to recognize Him as nondelimited, we must abnegate completely all forms of association or relationship with Him. Otherwise, we will be deposing God from His divinity and confusing what we term God with other than Him.

To recognize God as such and to exalt Him above ascent and descent, habitation and indwelling, separation and union, relationship, direction and intimation, and time and space, is the foundation of Bahá'í theology. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are replete with references to this theme, using a wide range of expressions such as “veiled in the ancient eternity of His own exalted and indivisible Essence” (*Gleanings* 148:1), “concealed in His inaccessible majesty and glory” (148:1), “dwelt in His inaccessible habitation of holiness and glory” (124:1), and “enthroned upon the heights of His independent sovereignty and grandeur” (124:1). The extent to which this reality is reiterated and stressed in the Bahá'í

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(Basítu'l-ḥaqíqah kullu'l-ashyá'), known as the Lawḥ-i-Basítatu'l-Ḥaqíqih, is published in the original language in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:140–147. The formulation of this doctrine, founded on the Neoplatonic concept of “the One”—that God, the One, is a simple and pure Being and, as such, is the totality of existence—is attributed to Mullá Ṣadrá.

21 For example, some traditions concerning deities in Hinduism, Elohim in Judaism, and trinity in Christianity, among others, attribute some form of multiplicity to God.

Writings makes it the fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief. To understand this truth is the greatest duty prescribed for Bahá'ís and to confess it in heart and mind is the first requirement when declaring one's faith in Bahá'u'lláh.

The following passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are representative of myriad others on this theme. Their study must follow a holistic approach which seeks to consider them within their context and as part of a balanced and cohesive whole, with due regard to the links that unite them. May this enable us to discover their inner meaning as thoroughly as human capacity and limits allow.

To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. (*Gleanings* 19:1)

No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence; inasmuch as by a word of His command all that are in heaven and on earth have come to exist, and by His wish, which is the Primal Will itself, all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being, the world of the visible. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70)

No tie of direct intercourse can ever bind Him to the things He hath created, nor can the most abstruse and most remote allusions of His creatures do justice to His being. (*Gleanings* 148:1)

. . . the one true God, alone and single, is established upon His Throne, a Throne which is beyond the reaches of time and space, is sanctified above all utterance or expression, intimation, description and definition, and is exalted beyond all notion of abasement and glory. And none knoweth this save Him and those with whom is the knowledge of the Book. No God is there but Him, the Almighty, the All-Bountiful. (*Summons* 167)

Alone and singly is He exalted upon His Throne, a Throne which transcendeth all conditions of time and space, expression and intimation, indication and description, loftiness and lowliness. And none knoweth this save every man of intelligence and insight. (*Lawḥ-i-Sarráj*, in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:81, provisional translation)

From time immemorial . . . He, the Divine Being, hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlasting continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence . . . (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi 113)

. . . let none construe these utterances to imply the incarnation or descent of the worlds of God into the grades of His creatures, nor should they lead thine eminence to such misapprehensions. For God, in His Essence, is sanctified above all ascent and descent, egress and regress . . . . (*Call* 2:45)

Know thou that God—exalted and glorified be He—doth in no wise manifest His inmost Essence and Reality. From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the eternity of His Essence and concealed in the infinitude of His own Being. (*Gems* ¶ 46)

The One True God, exalted be His glory, is bound unto none by the least tie of relationship or association, of similarity or resemblance . . . (Lawḥ-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:7, provisional translation)

Sanctified is His unknowable Essence from every incorporeal essence . . . (Tablet to Mullá Ḥámíd, in *Ḥadíqiy-i-'Irḩán* 110, provisional translation)

From everlasting, O my God, Thou hast been exalted in the loftiest heights of Thy dominion, Thy might, and Thy glory, and unto all eternity Thou wilt remain transcendent in the sublimity of Thy majesty, Thy grandeur, and Thy splendor. (Iranian National

Bahá'í Archives 71:31, provisional translation)

From eternity, the one true God, glorified be His mention, hath been and will continue to be sanctified from all manifestation and revelation. He is the unseen Essence never to be fathomed, the veiled Entity never to be perceived, the inmost Reality never to be made manifest, the hidden Treasure never to be revealed, and the invisible Mystery never to be laid bare . . . (*Áthár* 6:29, provisional translation)

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is He above being cast into any element, being restricted by any limitation, or being associated with anything in the entire creation. He hath from all eternity been immensely exalted beyond all else but Himself and sanctified from all save His own Self. (Lawḥ-i-Basíṭatu'l-Ḥaḩíqih, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:142, provisional translation)

In this essay, we intend to cite evidence primarily from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and to quote from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for further elucidation. It will, however, suffice to cite herein but one sample passage from the Writings of the Báb in support of this theme. Nearly all of the Writings of the Báb are replete with similar passages: “the substance and essence of the subject is this, that there can be

no doubt that from everlasting God hath been invested with the independent sovereignty of His exalted Being, and unto everlasting He will remain inaccessible in the transcendent majesty of His holy Essence” (§4:10).

Below are two passages from the Writings and utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that elucidate and explain the above excerpts from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh: “For that divine reality to descend into stations and degrees would be tantamount to deficiency, contrary to perfection, and utterly impossible. It has ever been, and will ever remain, in the loftiest heights of sanctity and purity” (*Some Answered Questions* 27:2).

Also:

The Divine Reality is Unthinkable, Limitless, Eternal, Immortal and Invisible. The world of creation is bound by natural law, finite and mortal. The Infinite Reality cannot be said to ascend or descend. It is beyond the understanding of man, and cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world. ... Riches and poverty, plenty and need: ... there could be no relation between these pairs of opposites. (*Paris Talks* 17:1–5)

The above arguments of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Interpreter of the Word of God, are at once the direct implication and explanation of a subject intimated

briefly yet frequently in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that God is pre-existent while the world of creation is originated; God is the Creator, the world is created; God is omnipotent, the world of creation is the essence of powerlessness. There is a fundamental variance and extreme distinction between God and the world. How can the creation, from its plane of origination, poverty, and powerlessness, imperfect as it is, hope to find a path to God, associate with Him, or seek nearness to Him? Therefore, where the Prophets, the sages, and the mystics speak of drawing near to God, finding a path towards Him, and turning to Him, one must search for their inner meanings and perceive their true purpose. The section “Proximity and Remoteness” in this essay explores this concept further.

#### NEGATING GOD’S NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES

We believe that no attributes can be ascribed to God, He cannot be called by any names, nor can He be regarded as possessing any perfections. Therefore, we cannot sing His praise with any attributes, names, or perfections.

Bahá’u’lláh states: “I testify that Thou hast been sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names. No God is there but Thee, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 92). He also writes: “no description can ever express Him and no word of praise magnify His glory” (*Tablets* 113). He further states: “Glorified be

the Merciful One, unto Whom no allusion can be made, Whom no expression can define, nor any assertion reveal, nor any evidence describe" (*Tablets* 102). He also writes: "Far is the realm of names from the court of His presence to which praise itself is ashamed to claim any relation and sanctification itself is abashed to allude. Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is He above every mention and every description" (Tablet to Jináb-i-Varqá, in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 19:262, provisional translation).

In interpreting these passages, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "the reality of the Ancient Being, in the sense that It is that It is, is sanctified from any acclamation or praise and exalted above any glorification and definition, any description and explanation" (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 1:134, provisional translation). He also writes: "no title can be mentioned for Him and enlightened souls can give Him no praise" (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 1:188, provisional translation). He further states: "The One True God is entirely beyond the reach of the mind and above all conception, for He is sanctified from all attributes and exalted above all praise. No name [can adequately describe Him], neither [can] any sign [lead to His knowledge]" (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 2:141, provisional translation).

Why can we ascribe no attributes to God? Because each attribute indicates a specific, limited, and distinct meaning. God's embodiment of any of these attributes would require His reality to be limited to the confines of

the specific meaning of each attribute, which is tantamount to limitation in His Essence. Likewise, these attributes are many. Were God to embody each of them from its specific aspect or perspective, it would either necessitate that He be divided into various aspects, perspectives, and relations, which would be tantamount to His being plural, leaving us unable to confess His singleness; or require Him to be in need of component parts, a need that would negate His All-Possessing and Self-Sufficient attributes.

In denying all division in God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "That reality admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being" (*Some Answered Questions* 27:1).

It quickly becomes evident that ascribing attributes to God and, by extension, calling Him by names signify only one reality: that He has no attributes or, in other words, His attributes are identical with His Essence. Otherwise, there would be a multiplicity of pre-existences, according to the philosophical terminology reiterated in the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, we would have to, of necessity, consider all the attributes we ascribe to God outside of His Essence as pre-existent and parallel to His Essence, and thereby commit blasphemy. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's elucidation, "the

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Mullá Şadrá 132.

essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is sanctified above all understanding. If the essential attributes were not identical with the Essence, then there would be a multiplicity of pre-existences and the distinction between the Essence and the attributes would therefore also be firmly established and pre-existent. But this would imply an infinite chain of pre-existences, which is an evident error” (*Some Answered Questions* 37:7). A more detailed discussion of this theme is available in other Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, such as His commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure.”<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, to preserve Divine unity, we must confess the oneness of God’s attributes and consider them as identical with His Essence. This requires us to negate everything that is other than His Essence. Were we even to ascribe affirmative attributes to God, this must convey negating some attributes from His Essence—the very attributes we see in His creation and which indicate the imperfection of the world of creation compared with the world of God. For instance, if we say that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, this must denote that we are negating the attributes of ignorance and weakness from His Essence, and not that we are ascribing to Him knowledge and power in an affirmative sense, as things that can be accepted and possessed, thereby

denying His oneness.

Bahá’u’lláh states: “He hath through all eternity been exalted beyond the attributes of His creation” (*Call* 2:45) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clarifies this concept in the following words:

Yet we ascribe certain names and attributes to the reality of the Divinity and praise Him for His sight, His hearing, His power, His life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes not to affirm the perfections of God, but to deny that He has any imperfections.

When we observe the contingent world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection, and thus we say that the sanctified Essence of the Divinity is all-knowing. Weakness is imperfection and power is perfection, and thus we say that that sanctified and divine Essence is all-powerful. It is not that we can understand His knowledge, His sight, His hearing, His power, or His life as they are in themselves: This is assuredly beyond our comprehension . . . (*Some Answered Questions* 37:6–7)

Moreover, since names and attributes are created by God and brought about through His command, they are unworthy of His station. In other words, since the Essence of God is the one and only Creator, if His names and attributes are other than His Essence, they are inevitably His creation. How can creation occupy the same station

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23 A provisional translation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure...” is available in Momen.

as the Creator, be ascribed to Him, or accompany Him? We have no recourse but to distance the attributes from the Creator and to keep them at the level of His creation.

Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Every name hath been raised up by His word and every attribute hath been revealed through His command, did ye but know" (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 38:224, provisional translation). He also states:

Praise beseems the Beloved, He Who from time immemorial hath been sanctified from the glorification of all created things and throughout eternity will be exalted above the praise of all beings. For the praise and glorification of all that are in heaven and on earth have been created and fashioned by His behest. How can a thing that hath been created at His bidding be worthy of His excellence and attain unto His highness? All else besides Him are unworthy of Him and all else save Him are unfit before Him. (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 41:282–83, provisional translation)

He further writes:

I cannot think, O my God, of any words wherewith to make mention of Thee, and know not how to express or extol Thee. Were I to attempt to describe Thee by Thy names, I would readily recognize that the kingdom of these names

is itself created through the movement of Thy fingers, and trembleth for fear of Thee. And were I to venture to extol Thine attributes, I would be forced to admit that these attributes are Thine own creation, and lie within Thy grasp. It behooveth not Them Who are the Manifestations of these names and attributes to stand before the gate of the city of Thy Revelation, how much less to scale the heights whereon Thou didst stablish the throne of Thy majesty.

I swear by Thy might, O Thou Who art the King of names and the Maker of the heavens! Whatsoever hath been adorned with the robe of words is but Thy creation which hath been generated in Thy realm and begotten through the operation of Thy will, and is wholly unworthy of Thy highness and falleth short of Thine excellence. (*Prayers* no. 176)

According to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, the world of existence has no beginning and no end. That is to say, since a creator without a creation is inconceivable, there cannot have been a time when God existed without a creation. Were it to be suggested that God brought the world into existence from non-existence,<sup>24</sup> it must

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<sup>24</sup> The assertion that God created the world out of nothing, or *creatio ex nihilo*, can be found in some Jewish scholarship, early Christian thought, and some Islamic commentaries. For example, refer to Maimonides ch. LXXIV.

be clarified that by non-existence is not meant absolute non-existence, but relative non-existence. We do not intend to discuss this theme or prove its truth here as it is outside the scope of the subject before us.<sup>25</sup> What is relevant in this theme, however, is the Islamic tradition, “God was alone; there was none else besides Him” (Al-Bukhárí no. 3191). In interpreting this *hadíth*, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the negation of all things from God is not bound by the limits of time. In other words, God was, is, and will forever be alone, with none else besides Him. Nothing whatsoever, no name or attribute, compares with His Essence. He was, is, and will be alone, without any names, attributes, and matters besides Him that are other than and outside His Essence. In summary, we must negate all names, praises, and descriptions—all that is created—from God.

Bahá'u'lláh states: “We testify that there is none other God but Him, that from everlasting He was alone with none else besides Him, and that He shall be unto everlasting what He hath ever been” (*Summons* 152–53). He also writes:

Know assuredly that God's creation hath existed from eternity, and will continue to exist forever. Its beginning hath had no beginning, and its end knoweth no end. His name, the Creator,

presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant.

As to those sayings, attributed to the Prophets of old, such as, “In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him,” and “The Lord was alone; with no one to adore Him,” the meaning of these and similar sayings is clear and evident, and should at no time be misapprehended. To this same truth bear witness these words which He hath revealed: “God was alone; there was none else besides Him. He will always remain what He hath ever been.” Every discerning eye will readily perceive that the Lord is now manifest, yet there is none to recognize His glory. By this is meant that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of anyone besides Him. Whatsoever in the contingent world can either be expressed or apprehended, can never transgress the limits which, by its inherent nature, have been imposed upon it. God, alone, transcendeth such limitations. He, verily, is from everlasting. No peer or partner has been, or can ever be, joined with Him. No name can be compared with His Name. No pen can portray His nature, neither can any tongue depict His glory. He will, forever, remain immeasurably exalted above anyone except Himself. (*Gleanings* 78:1–2)

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25 For a discussion of the Bahá'í belief regarding this theme, refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* nos. 47, 80.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives an example to elucidate this truth, acknowledging that examples are inappropriate in relation to the station of God, because “that Essence of supreme singleness can in no wise be likened to anything, for It is beyond the reach of all reasoning and comprehension and too great to be likened or compared to anything” (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 2:7, provisional translation). Yet metaphor and allegory are unavoidable for human beings who aspire to investigate the mysteries of the Divine reality on this earthly plane:

For instance, consider the “point” and how within the essence and reality of the “point” letters and words are wrapped up and inherent with utter nothingness and evanescence in such wise that no trace of existence can possibly be found in letters and words, nor is there any distinction between them and the “point.” Rather they are wholly effaced and utterly evanescent and have no existence save in the essence of the “point.” In like manner, the names and attributes of God and the evidences of His Essence are wholly evanescent and utterly non-existent before the realm of His supreme singleness in such wise that they enjoy neither a material nor a mental existence. This original “point” is the hidden treasure of these letters and words. Within it are they deposited and from it do they appear. . . . Likewise consider the unit “one” and

how all numbers emanate from it, yet it is not a number in itself, for it is the basis of all numbers.<sup>26</sup> The first entification<sup>27</sup> and emanation of the unit “one” is the number “one,” and from the number “one” do all numbers come into being. And now, these numbers, in the utmost simplicity and oneness, were folded up within the unit “one,” which was the hidden treasure of all numbers, and from which they emanated. Consider then that although from the “point” do all letters and words appear and from the unit “one” do all numbers emanate, neither doth the primal “point” descend from its station of transcendence nor is the unit “one” debarred from its kingdom of sanctity. Such is the station of the hidden treasure . . . (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 2:8–9, provisional translation)

#### GOD’S UNKNOWABILITY: THE FAILURE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE TO COMPREHEND THE ESSENCE OF GOD

God is concealed from the eyes. The intellect can hope for no access to Him.

26 In the philosophy of Plotinus and a number of other Neoplatonists, “the One” is the ultimate reality and source of all existence. See Gerson and Wildberg.

27 Entification—sometimes rendered as specification or individuation—refers to the realization of an object of knowledge or, in other words, to an action through which an object which has an intelligible existence finds actual existence in the external world.

No mind can comprehend Him as He is in His own Self. No heart can partake of His remembrance. No tongue can sing His praise. Therefore, when His Chosen Ones speak of the promise of attaining to His Presence, urge us to call Him to mind, consider His recognition to be the foundation of faith, recognize that His remembrance brings peace to the hearts and tranquility to the souls, and mention His Name continually, we must contemplate the true meaning of these words and the reason They stress these principles.

This theme will be discussed separately. Suffice it to say here that not only the ordinary people but also the Chosen Ones of God are powerless to understand Him and as They tread this endless path, They grow in bewilderment. Therefore, They consider the knowledge of God to be beyond the ability of man, discredit those who claim to know God, view this very claim as a sign of inability and superficiality, and witness this disrespect with dismay. Since They find the knowledge of God to be impossible, They deem His remembrance and description inappropriate. Powerless to understand God, They pronounce His worship sacrilege.

All human attainment moveth upon a lame ass whilst Truth, riding upon the wind, darteth across space. (Rúmi ver. 3:3721, qtd. in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 132)

My very celebration of His praise is ungodliness for it evidenceth self-assertion, a

transgression so grievous. (Rúmi ver. 1:517)

The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh greatly emphasize this theme. That no book, epistle, or tablet can be found that does not refer to this theme or some of its premises and consequences is not an overstatement. Not only does Bahá'u'lláh describe and stress this theme Himself, but He also frequently cites the traditions of the past to substantiate it and demonstrates its truth according to the thoughts and beliefs of various peoples, nations, and religions. The Bahá'í Writings are replete with such passages as “No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving” (Qur’án 6:103, qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 19:1), “Nought of His knowledge do they comprehend” (Qur’án 2:255, qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár* 7:301),<sup>28</sup> “God would have you beware of Himself” (Qur’án 3:28, in qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70), “We have failed to recognize Thee as befitteth Thy recognition,”<sup>29</sup> and “The way is barred, and all seeking rejected.”<sup>30</sup>

Too numerous are the passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that

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28 This passage from Qur’án 2:255 is quoted here in its translation by J. M. Rodwell.

29 A *ḥadīth* attributed to Muḥammad and quoted in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure,” published in the original language in *Makátib-i-‘Abdu'l-Bahá* 2:29.

30 Attributed to Imám ‘Alí and quoted in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100.

proclaim God unknowable, incomprehensible, ineffable, and indescribable to quote them all here. Citing some examples here will suffice to demonstrate that our discussion of this theme is in accordance with, and derived from, the Bahá'í Writings:

Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. "No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving." (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70)

Immeasurably exalted is He above the strivings of human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery. (*Gleanings* 148:1)

Who is it that can claim to have attained the heights of His exalted Essence, and what mind can measure the depths of His unfathomable mystery? . . . How indescribably lofty are the tokens of His consummate power, a single sign of which, however inconsiderable, must transcend the comprehension of whatsoever hath, from the beginning that hath no beginning, been brought into being, or will be created in the future till the end that hath no end. All the Embodiments

of His Names wander in the wilderness of search, athirst and eager to discover His Essence, and all the Manifestations of His Attributes implore Him, from the Sinai of Holiness, to unravel His mystery. (*Gleanings* 26:1)

. . . no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. . . . Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure. . . . How can mine eye, which hath no faculty to perceive itself, claim to have discerned Thine Essence, and how can mine heart, already powerless to apprehend the significance of its own potentialities, pretend to have comprehended Thy nature? . . . The portals of Thy grace have throughout eternity been open, and the means of access unto Thy Presence made available, unto all created things, and the revelations of Thy matchless Beauty have at all times been imprinted upon the realities of all beings, visible and invisible. Yet, notwithstanding this most gracious favor, this perfect and consummate bestowal, I am moved to testify that Thy court

of holiness and glory is immeasurably exalted above the knowledge of all else besides Thee, and the mystery of Thy Presence is inscrutable to every mind except Thine own. . . . How vast the number of those heavenly and all-glorious beings who, in the wilderness of their separation from Thee, have wandered all the days of their lives, and failed in the end to find Thee! How great the multitude of the sanctified and immortal souls who were lost and bewildered while seeking in the desert of search to behold Thy face! Myriad are Thine ardent lovers whom the consuming flame of remoteness from Thee hath caused to sink and perish, and numberless are the faithful souls who have willingly laid down their lives in the hope of gazing on the light of Thy countenance. The sighs and moans of these longing hearts that pant after Thee can never reach Thy holy court, neither can the lamentations of the wayfarers that thirst to appear before Thy face attain Thy seat of glory. (*Gleanings* 26:3–4)

How lofty hath been His incorruptible Essence, how completely independent of the knowledge of all created things, and how immensely exalted will it remain above the praise of all the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth! (*Gleanings* 124:1)

Say: The grace of God can never

be adequately understood; how much less can His own Self, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, be comprehended! (*Summons* 37)

Whosoever layeth claim to have known His Essence is without doubt among the most ignorant of all people. Every atom in the universe would charge such a man with imposture, and to this beareth witness My tongue which speaketh naught but the truth. (*Summons* 55)

Too high is the All-Merciful for the hearts of those who have recognized Him to apprehend His true nature, or for the minds of men to hope to fathom His essence. He verily is exalted above the understanding of anyone besides Himself, and sanctified beyond the comprehension of all else save Him. From all eternity He hath been independent of the entire creation. (*Summons* 153)

No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever fathomed the nature of His Being. In the valley of His knowledge every mystic wandereth astray; in the comprehension of His Essence every saint standeth bewildered. Sanctified is He above the understanding of the wise; exalted is He beyond the knowledge of the knowing! “The way is barred and all seeking rejected. His proof is His signs, His evidence His being.”

Wherefore the lovers of the countenance of the Beloved have said, “O Thou Whose Essence alone can lead to His Essence, and Who transcendeth all likeness to His creatures”. How can utter nothingness spur its charger in the arena of eternity, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun? (*Call 2:45–46*)

. . . every man of understanding hath acknowledged his powerlessness to attain the sacred realms of His knowledge and every pure in heart hath confessed his failure to soar to the heights of His mention and His praise. He, verily, overshadoweth all created things and He, in truth, is the Almighty, the Most Bountiful. (*Súratu'l-Hajj, in Áthár 4:95, provisional translation*)

Know thou, moreover, that none can ever hope to approach Him and all others are as nothing when compared with Him. He, verily, is the All-Powerful, the Most Glorious, the Best-Beloved. . . . The comprehension of His creatures can never be associated with Him, if ye be of them that comprehend. (*Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 38:223–24, provisional translation*)

Thou didst prescribe no other path for anyone to know Thee besides utter powerlessness and didst destine no other refuge for anyone to

fly to save absolute nothingness. O my God, the tongues fall short of attaining Thy praise and the minds are sore perplexed when seeking to comprehend the essence of Thy beauty. (*Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 65:273–74, provisional translation*)

How, otherwise, can utter nothingness magnify the Name of Him Who hath, by a word, brought creation into being, and how can an evanescent creature extol Him Who hath demonstrated that no description can ever express Him and no word of praise magnify His glory? He hath from everlasting been immeasurably exalted above the understanding of His creatures and sanctified from the conceptions of His servants. (*Tablets 113*)

Every man of understanding hath been so bewildered at Thy knowledge, and every man endued with insight been so perplexed in his attempt to fathom the signs of Thy great glory, that all have recognized their powerlessness to visualize, and their impotence to soar into, the heaven wherefrom one of the Luminaries of the Manifestations of Thy knowledge and of the Day-Springs of Thy wisdom hath shone forth. Who is he that shall befittingly describe this most sublime station and this most august seat—the seat which, as decreed by Thee, transcendeth the comprehension of Thy creatures and

the testimonies of Thy servants, and which hath everlastingly been hid from the understanding and the knowledge of men, and been closed with the seal of Thy name, the Self-Subsisting. (*Prayers* 176:34)

Too high art Thou for the praise of those who are nigh unto Thee to ascend unto the heaven of Thy nearness, or for the birds of the hearts of them who are devoted to Thee to attain to the door of Thy gate. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 92)

Exalted art Thou above my praise and the praise of anyone beside me, above my description and the description of all who are in heaven and all who are on earth! (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 96)

The highest expressions of praise and glory from either human pen or tongue cannot transcend human limitations and infinite is the distance between the Most Sublime Vision and the station of man. How great the difference between all that pertaineth to man and a station which is immeasurably sanctified above the inmost essence of sanctity and purity. . . . Of old it hath been revealed: "The way is barred and the path rejected."<sup>31</sup>

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31 An alternative form of this passage, attributed to Imám 'Alí, is also quoted time and again in the Bahá'í Writings: "The way is barred and all seeking rejected." Provisional translation of an

In truth, to make mention of God, exalted be His glory and encompassing be His grace, and to celebrate His praise are unseemly. For the way to that sanctuary is barred and the path to that mystery, that mystery of all mysteries, is forbidden. How great the difference between the visible assemblage and the invisible solitude. Where is the path to be found and what of the way? For the pen to make mention of the Ancient of Days is like unto an ant glorifying the Lord and for the tongue to sing the praise of the Best-Beloved of the worlds is even as a mere atom pointing to the sun or a mere drop telling of the ocean. . . . thou knowest that the Unseen Reality is sanctified from, and immeasurably exalted above, the description of the dwellers of the realm of the seen. Inasmuch as the men of insight and the beholders of the Most Sublime Vision thus testify unto this indubitable truth, no recourse is there, nor hath there ever been, save reliance upon His Chosen Ones. (Tablet to to Áqá Mírzá Áqá Afnán, in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 31:107, provisional translation)

No praise which any being is able to utter can ever hope to reach Him, neither can the thanksgiving of all created things ever gain

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excerpt from an Arabic-Persian Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, published in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 15:132.

admittance into the Court of His Presence. No search can lead to Him Who hath neither likeness nor peer. The sages and the mystics are powerless to describe Him and the learned and the wise confess their inability.<sup>32</sup>

PROOFS OF THE POWERLESSNESS  
OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE TO  
COMPREHEND THE ESSENCE OF GOD

Although no sensible observer requires evidence as to the inability of human knowledge to comprehend God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets forth proofs and elaborate arguments and enumerates ample evidence and examples in order to demonstrate its truth. In this essay, we list these proofs and cite passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh in their support.

*ONE: TO COMPREHEND AN OBJECT,  
WE MUST FIRST ENCOMPASS IT*

In other words, the object of our comprehension must be contained within our mind. Unless and until we encompass an object, comprehension is impossible, or at best incomplete and relative—that is, in proportion to our imperfect conception and the limited capacity of our mind.

It follows, then, that we must confess our powerlessness to comprehend God, for comprehension is the result of encompassing and God can never be encompassed. We can only hope

to form an imagination of a finite and incomplete reality, within the intrinsic limits of our mind, and consider this imagination to be the comprehension of God. It is needless to say that the finite, incomplete, and relative reality we imagine is far from the reality of God's Essence and attributes—and His attributes are identical to His Essence.

*TWO: GOD IS OUR CREATOR AND WE  
ARE HIS CREATURES*

Every creator has knowledge of his creation. This knowledge is an active knowledge, one that originates and actualizes the object of one's knowledge. In other words, the existence of the created object is dependent upon this knowledge. Creation, however, can never know the creator. By virtue of being created, it emanates—hence separates—from its creator. This separation between the two persists so long as one is a creator and the other the creation. Therefore, creation can hope for no access to its creator unless it is allowed to ascend to the station of creator, unite with it, return to it, and die in its essence, in order to overcome their separation. As will be explored later in this essay, Bahá'ís believe that this is not possible, except for the Manifestations of God and only in Their station of essential unity. No painting can ever recognize its painter and no handiwork can hope to comprehend its craftsman.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

No creature hath ever recognized Him as befitteeth His recognition, nor hath any man ever praised

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32 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

Him as is worthy of His praise. For all things visible have appeared through but a single letter of the word of His command that encompasseth the innermost realities of all created things.... How, therefore, can such as is created through but a melody of the voices of His utterance ascend unto the heavens of His eternity? (*Hadíqiy-i-'Irfán* 110, provisional translation)

*THREE: NO INFERIOR BEING CAN COMPREHEND THAT WHICH IS SUPERIOR*

The superior stage possesses the properties of the inferior and is, therefore, to some extent familiar with it. The inferior stage, on the contrary, does not possess the properties of the superior one and cannot duly recognize it. For example, the animal, in addition to the animal life and the properties of the animal kingdom, also possesses the vegetable life and the characteristics that emanate from this kingdom, such as the consumption of food and respiration. But the animal, as long as it belongs to the animal kingdom, cannot attain the rational faculty, nor realize its attributes—proceeding from premises to the conclusion and deducing the unknown from the known. If in the world of creation the inferior stage cannot comprehend the superior, the same can be inferred *a fortiori* between the creation and the Divinity: human knowledge, which is relative and contingent, can never comprehend the Absolute and Necessary Being.

*FOUR: THE ESSENCE OF THINGS IS UNKNOWABLE AND UNFATHOMABLE; THEREFORE, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FULLY COMPREHEND ANYTHING*

We can only know the attributes that emerge from things to the extent that they are presented to our knowledge and interact with our comprehension. The essence of things always remains separate from us and unknown, unless, in comprehending something, its essence is transformed into ours, the otherness between the two is eliminated, and the subject and the object of knowledge become one. If we cannot know the essence of any created being, understanding the Essence of God is, with greater reason, beyond the limits of our capacity. It is possible to know the attributes of created beings while their essence remains unknown; however, since the attributes of God are identical with His Essence, the unknowability of His Essence is tantamount to the unknowability of His attributes. In other words, since we cannot understand the Essence of God, neither can we understand His attributes.

*FIVE: GOD IS THE EVER-INVISIBLE; MAN IS IN THE VISIBLE PLANE*

For God to be known, He must emerge from the Invisible realm and manifest Himself in the visible world. So long as this does not take place, neither can His recognition. Insofar as He is concealed from the eyes and minds, He remains Unseen and Unknown. Were He to be known, He would cease to be termed the Invisible God.

The name “the Invisible” is applicable so long as He is not seen. In such a case, He is not visible that He may be made known. And were He to be seen, His name “the Invisible” would no longer exist that He may be recognized as such. Wherefore, He hath ever been and shall ever remain invisible and unknown. Blessed is the one who pondereth upon this absolute, this unmistakable Word of God and recognizeth the gem that is treasured therein. Whoso claimeth to have known the Invisible, in the sense that He is the Invisible, he speaketh not the truth. Immeasurably exalted is that Ancient Beauty above the recognition of all else besides Him and sanctified is He beyond the praise of anyone save His own unknowable Essence. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár* 6:29, provisional translation)

#### THEISM AND IDOLATRY

Since we cannot know God—that is, we cannot contain Him within the limits of our powerless understanding—that which we love and worship as God, and which we claim to have recognized, is a finite reality that is a form of creation. He is a deity that is a figment of man’s imagination and is fashioned by the human mind. Instead of man’s creator, he is man’s creation. To worship him is tantamount to praising our own creation as the Object of our adoration. If this is our own situation, how can we criticize idol-worshippers, who also worship what they create?

At least, what the idolaters carve and worship has an existence that can be sensed. What God-worshippers create and call God is utterly fictitious.<sup>33</sup> Bahá'u'lláh writes: “that which the creation comprehendeth at the highest degrees of its mystic knowledge is nothing but an illusion of comprehension, an idle fancy originated of themselves for themselves. Immeasurably exalted is the pre-existent above the knowledge of the originated” (*Áthár* 6:29, provisional translation).

#### CONFESSION OF THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD TO THEIR POWERLESSNESS TO COMPREHEND HIM

Not only the generality of humankind, but also the Chosen Ones amongst them, Those in the highest degrees of mystic knowledge—namely, the Manifestations of God—are powerless to know the Essence of God. This is because differences in degrees in the world of existence prevent the inferior being from understanding the superior. So long as the Manifestations of God are in the station of distinction and limitation and viewed in the standpoint of Their humanity, They are, notwithstanding Their sublime station and exalted character, separate from God,

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33 All that is said in these pages about the powerlessness of man to understand God is from the Writings and utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that elucidate and explain the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh on this theme. See, for example, *Selections* nos. 2, 21, and 24; *Some Answered Questions* no. 37; *Paris Talks* no. 5; and *Promulgation* no. 125.

different from Him, inferior to Him, and created by Him. Conversely, viewed in the station of Their essential unity—in Their connection to the Source, union with God, dying to the self, and living in Him—there is no mention of understanding Him, since the subject of understanding unites with the object and ceases to exist distinctively. Whenever They speak of understanding God, sing His praise, or offer Him thanksgiving, They regard these very acts as proof that They remain far from God, assert Their independent existence before Him, and fall short of utter nothingness, which is the highest station of devotion and the ultimate pre-requisite of worship. Confessing Their ingratitude, They lament having remembered God and having celebrated His praise. As though They have committed a grave sin, They repent: “The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the near ones.”<sup>34</sup> Sometimes, owing to the requirements of Their humanity, They think Themselves bound to remember God and make mention of Him, and seek forgiveness. At times, They recognize Their worship, remembrance, and praise of God to be in response to His bidding, His permission, His grace, and His bounty:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted art  
Thou above mine attempt to ever  
make mention of Thee or to extol  
Thee. Even were all mankind to

approach Thee with their glorification of Thy oneness, verily I hope to draw nigh unto Thee with my confession of impiety before Thee, for none save Thee can ever laud Thy oneness inasmuch as the slightest whispering of aught else except Thyself is the mightiest proof of Thine inaccessible sublimity and the very presence of duality is the most potent evidence of Thine unattainable loftiness. Glorified, immensely glorified art Thou! And if all mankind approach Thee by celebrating Thy praise, verily I seek to draw nigh unto Thee by sanctifying Thee from the glorification of anyone except Thine own Self and exalting Thee above the praise of all else but Thyself inasmuch as the very existence of description indicateth separation from that which is being described. . . . (The Báb, Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 82:54, provisional translation)

Thou seest, O my Lord, my dwelling-place in the heart of this mountain and Thou dost witness my forbearance. Verily I have desired naught else but Thy love and the love of those who love Thee. How can I extol the effulgent beauty of Thy Lordship, conscious as I am of my nothingness before the habitation of Thy glory? Yet the sorrow of solitude and loneliness prompteth me to invoke Thee through this prayer, perchance Thy trusted servants may become

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34 This statement is attributed to Al-Junayd Al-Baghdádí or Abú Sa'íd Al-Kharráz.

aware of my lamentations, may supplicate unto Thee on my behalf, and Thou wouldst graciously answer their prayers as a token of Thy grace and Thy favor. I bear witness that there is no God but Thee, inasmuch as Thou art invested with sovereignty, grandeur, glory and power which no one among Thy servants can visualize or comprehend. Indeed Thou shalt, by virtue of that which is inherent in Thine Essence, ever remain inscrutable unto all except Thyself. (The Báb, *Selections* 7:47)

Unto all eternity none except Thyself shall ever comprehend Thee nor anyone save Thine own Self ever worship Thee as befiteth Thy oneness, for knowledge shall be fulfilled only following union and oneness shall be established only after separation. Such is impossible in the realms of certitude inasmuch as from eternity Thou hast existed with no description in the world of creation and unto all eternity Thou wilt continue to be one and the same with no praise in the entire universe. (The Báb, Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 86:186, provisional translation)

Wert Thou, O my God, to afflict me with all Thy chastisement for evermore, for as long as Thine own Essence endureth, as a punishment for uttering any word

before Thy presence, I would in truth be deserving thereof . . .<sup>35</sup>

The above passages as well as numerous others from the Writings of the Báb demonstrate the truth of the statements in this theme. Several extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are also quoted below in support of this theme:

All the Prophets of God and their chosen Ones, all the divines, the sages, and the wise of every generation, unanimously recognize their inability to attain unto the comprehension of that Quintessence of all truth, and confess their incapacity to grasp Him, Who is the inmost Reality of all things. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70)

Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, "Thou shalt never behold Me!"; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, "Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!" (*Gleanings* 26:3)

"[A]ttainment unto the divine Presence" is in this sense obviously possible to no one, inasmuch as this revelation is confined to the

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35 Provisional translation of an excerpt from the Writings of the Báb.

innermost Essence, unto which no man can attain. "The way is barred, and all seeking rejected." The minds of the favorites of heaven, however high they soar, can never attain this station, how much less the understanding of obscured and limited minds. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100)

Notwithstanding my certitude that the praise of naught except Him can befittingly magnify His glory and my confession that the description of none save His own Self can express Him, I make mention of Him in mine obedience to that which He hath sent down in His perspicuous Book. In truth, the world of the heart rejoiceth not save in His praise, and no delight followeth the sorrows of the hearts and the anguish of the souls save in His remembrance. The remembrance of His Name is the dawning-place of exultation and His praise the day-spring of the sun of rapture. (Tablet to Abu'l-Ḥasan-i-Ardikání, in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 15:179, provisional translation)

The tongues and the eyes, all knowledge and understanding, and their signs and fruits that have come into being through but a single word proceeding from Him have never been nor will ever be worthy of His court. However, as the Lord of Names hath caused His remembrance

and praise to emanate from the Source of the Revelation through His loving-kindness, we cleave to the cord of His remembrance and cling to the hem of His praise.<sup>36</sup>

Glory be to the Desire of the world Who, from time immemorial, hath been sanctified from all glorification. The quintessence of praise beseemeth the Lord of Names, He to Whose exaltation above every praise by aught else save Himself have testified all that are wholly devoted to His Cause, the favored among the faithful, and they that truly uphold His unity. And as the sea of His loving-kindness surged and the fragrance of His grace was diffused, as a token of His favor and bounty He granted the glorification of His unknowable Essence and permitted the praise of His impenetrable Being. Thus were the tongues, through the splendors of the day-star of His leave, strengthened and emboldened to make mention of Him. For otherwise, how can the essence of negation appear in the arena of affirmation and utter nothingness set foot in the realm of immortality? His bounty did succor and His grace did grant leave. (*Áthár* 6:198, provisional translation)

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36 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

“WE HAVE FAILED  
TO RECOGNIZE THEE  
AS BEFITTEH THY RECOGNITION”

To prove this point—namely, the confession of the Prophets of God and their chosen ones to their powerlessness to comprehend His Essence—many Bahá'í Writings quote words to this effect attributed to Muḥammad. The following passage from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is but one example:

Salutation and praise be upon that merciful essence, that eternal Manifestation, that radiant temple Who ordained and guided, Who manifested and bestowed, Who gathered and summoned, proclaiming: “We have failed to recognize Thee as befitteh Thy recognition.”<sup>37</sup> He, in truth, is the peerless luminary Who, in elucidating the Essence of the Lord of all worlds, illuminated the vast immensity with the rays of certitude, confessed His powerlessness and failure, and acknowledged being debarred and prevented. For verily, the acme of human understanding is the confession of helplessness to recognize Him. Otherwise, the people of oblivion lay claim to the knowledge of the Essence of the All-Merciful out of the growing intensity of their rebellion, whereas all that they vainly believe to have discerned and expressed in their subtlest terms is

but an imagination of their minds or a contemplation of their hearts that can hardly quench the thirst or remedy the feeble. (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 1:133–134, provisional translation)

It can be seen that the Interpreter of the Word exalts the station of Muḥammad, quotes His words, “We have failed to recognize Thee as befitteh Thy recognition,” stresses that the highest form of the quest to know God is to confess one’s powerlessness to recognize Him, and alludes to the following tradition attributed to Imám ‘Alí: “All that ye vainly believe to have discerned and expressed in your subtlest terms is but a creature like unto you and returneth unto your own selves.” This indicates that what is found in the Bahá'í Writings concerning the impossibility of knowing God and the necessity of avoiding any such claim constitutes the foundation and the essence of all religions, accepting which is a duty of all who believe in God.

“HE HATH KNOWN GOD WHO HATH  
KNOWN HIMSELF”

An important discussion in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that is relevant to the theme of God’s unknowability is His commentary on the Islamic tradition “He hath known God who hath known himself.”<sup>38</sup> Suggesting that if one

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38 The English translation of most passages from this commentary is published in *Gleanings* no. 83. It is published in the original Arabic in *Majmú'iy-i-Alváh* 351–54.

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37 *Aḥādith* attributed to Muḥammad.

knows oneself, then one knows one's Creator, this *hadith* appears to open a door toward God and pave the way for knowing Him. A closer examination demonstrates, however, that likening the knowledge of God to the knowledge of self in this statement confirms the comments and conclusions offered thus far about the theology that stems from the Bahá'í Writings.

The rational soul is a single faculty the evidences of whose activity become manifest in various body parts, as numerous powers, senses, and movements. For instance, instruments such as sight, hearing, speech, will, purpose, and motion are evidences of the activity of the rational faculty in the human body and without these evidences it is impossible to know the soul. In other words, unless and until the rational soul desires its agency, ordains a particular purpose, exercises a specific function, and manifests itself as a certain behavior, its existence can never be concluded. What is known as self-reflection, therefore, is one's awareness of a state of one's soul, for instance when reflecting upon one's fear, anger, lust, sorrow, or decision. Otherwise, the essence of the soul, when considered in the absence of any manifestation or evidence of its activity, is unknowable.

If we close our eyes and turn our attention inwards, we find an image of an object we have seen and remembered, a sorrow we have experienced from an event, a love we feel towards a friend, a grudge we bear against an enemy, a longing we have to attain a goal, a decision we make to reach a destination,

or a similar state. There is nothing else to find. That is to say, no reflection on the inner self can reveal something that can be named the essence of the human soul. Therefore, the statement, "He hath known God who hath known himself," means that the essence of God, like the essence of the rational soul, is unknowable. Just as we comprehend our soul in the form it manifests itself in our various states and conditions and the function it performs through the agency of our different body parts, we can also know God by recognizing His Manifestations. Otherwise, there is no path to Him, nor does any direct tie bind Him to us. Any claim to the knowledge of His Essence or to unity with Him is refuted: "The way is barred, and all seeking rejected."<sup>39</sup>

#### PROXIMITY AND REMOTENESS

God is the creator, the origin, and the animating source of all things. Every created thing has stepped into the realm of being through a share of the divine revelation it has received. So God's existence and knowledge encompass all things. God is close to everything; He is indeed closer to all beings than their own selves. We, however, remain heedless of this divine revelation at some times and become aware of it at others. God is always near; we might be close to Him or far from Him. "Wonder not, if my Best-Beloved be closer to me than mine own self; wonder at this, that

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39 Attributed to Imám 'Alí and quoted in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100.

I, despite such nearness, should still be so far from Him.”<sup>40</sup> This mention of proximity and remoteness is no doubt in relation to the revelation of God in this world and the outpourings of His manifestation which reaches His creation. Otherwise, there can be no separation or union, no nearness or remoteness between His necessary Essence and the contingent world. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

[T]he one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness. His reality transcendeth such limitations. His relationship to His creatures knoweth no degrees. That some are near and others are far is to be ascribed to the manifestations themselves.

. . . How often hath the human heart, which is the recipient of the light of God and the seat of the revelation of the All-Merciful, erred from Him Who is the Source of that light and the Wellspring of that revelation. It is the waywardness of the heart that removeth it far from God, and condemneth it to remoteness from Him. Those hearts, however, that are aware of His Presence, are close to Him, and are to be regarded as having drawn nigh unto His throne.

Consider, moreover, how

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40 A verse from Sa'dí's *Gulistán* and quoted in a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, published in *Gleanings* no. 93. It alludes to the statement, “We are closer to man than his life-vein,” in Qur'án 50:16.

frequently doth man become forgetful of his own self, whilst God remaineth, through His all-encompassing knowledge, aware of His creature, and continueth to shed upon him the manifest radiance of His glory. It is evident, therefore, that, in such circumstances, He is closer to him than his own self. He will, indeed, so remain forever, for, whereas the one true God knoweth all things, perceiveth all things, and comprehendeth all things, mortal man is prone to err, and is ignorant of the mysteries that lie enfolded within him. . . . (*Gleanings* 93:4–6)

Every man of insight observeth with the eye of discernment that proximity and remoteness are to be ascribed to the manifestations themselves. Immeasurably exalted is that Ancient King above any proximity and remoteness, above all mentions, names, and attributes. In this sense, nearness to God consisteth in turning towards Him, and remoteness in remaining heedless of Him. (*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 1:58–59, provisional translation)

This essay has thus far attempted to exalt the Essence of God and to refute any notion of a direct tie between the world of God and the world of creation by introducing passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh on this theme. It is worth noting that any such attempt to exalt God—in which such names and

attributes as single, simple, nonde-limited, and incorporeal are ascribed to Him—conforms to the bounds of human existence and is subject to our narrow understanding and limited conception. Otherwise, nothing can be said about the Essence of God as He is in Himself: whatever can fit the limits of our finite language, be it an expression of His transcendence, singleness, simplicity, nondelimitation, or incorporeality, is not befitting His station. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Had it not been incumbent upon me to abide by Thy bidding and to submit to Thy command, I would have exalted Thee above my knowledge of Thy unity and beyond my mention of Thy Self. For who am I to praise Thee? Every praise which ascendeth from me is in accordance with mine own measure, not with Thine. It is a sin that proceedeth from the sin of my very existence and a trespass that ariseth from the trespass of mine inmost reality.<sup>41</sup>

Although to deem God exalted above any comparison, likeness, or peer is the acme of human understanding in the eyes of men, even as it marketh the highest and the most exalted station amongst the people, yet even this distinction must needs depend upon the sanction of God and is conditioned

upon the confirmation of His Will. ... Otherwise, that Ocean of eternity is sanctified from all such contrived words and the Court of His Presence is exalted above all these statements. Let all fix their gaze upon the fundamentals of the Cause of God, not upon the loftiness or the lowliness of the stations of human understanding in words, such as is established amongst the people. (*Iqtidárát* 89, provisional translation)

Therefore, there can be no doubt that any word that describes God, in order to exalt His station, like all the names and attributes of God, refers to the Manifestations of His Cause. All we can understand about God lies within the bounds of human understanding of the revelation of God in the world of creation and of the effusion of His outpourings through His Manifestations among the people.

#### THE REVELATION OF GOD

Thus far, this essay has elaborated the Bahá'í view of the transcendence of God and provided excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh in its support. There can be no doubt, following a careful study of these passages, that the Bahá'ís exalt the Essence of God, deem His existence to be transcendent above all else, consider His reality unknowable and His threshold unattainable, and reject any notion of similarity and relation between God and His creation. Their conviction in the transcendence

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41 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

of God finds its root in the explicit Text of the Bahá'í Writings and in the outward evidences in the world of creation, and not in individual interpretations of these passages, which could be questioned or refuted. It is, after all, forbidden to corrupt the Text and distort its explicit meaning: "Whoso interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶105).

#### EMANATION FROM GOD

God has ever been and will forever be the Creator; His being the Creator has neither beginning nor end ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 47). All are His creatures and have been created at His behest. Every created being emanates from Him and enjoys a degree of existence in this emanational procession. The existence of each being, therefore, is an effusion of grace outpouring from the Source. Should this grace be withheld, the being will return to non-existence. Every being then, owing to its very existence, carries a sign of God. In other words, stepping into the realm of being signifies receiving a share of God's grace.

It must be emphasized that God does not appear as anything, nor does He become incarnate in anything. The views of anthropomorphists,<sup>42</sup>

who perceive God in human form, or pantheists<sup>43</sup> completely differ from those of the Bahá'ís.<sup>44</sup> The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh explicitly assert that the world of creation emanates from God, but God does not appear in it. The existence of every created thing is the outpouring of God's grace, emanating from His absolute existence, and limited in its form through the emanational procession according to the will of God and commensurate with each stage and station, thus taking a unique form in each degree of existence. The difference in stages and stations is the cause of plurality and diversity in the world of creation. The effusion of this outpouring can never cause the nondelimited divine Reality to divide into parts, dissolve into other forms, or become incarnate in things. It is this outpouring of God's grace, this emanational procession, that has long been referred to as the "revelation of God" in the works

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in deities with human forms and qualities. Throughout history, mythologies have represented God with human appearance and personality. Some anthropomorphic deities have included the gods of love, wealth, rain, war, and fertility. A literal interpretation of biblical verses such as Genesis 1:27, concerning the creation of humankind in God's image, might lead one to espouse an anthropomorphic vision of God.

43 Pantheists believe that nothing exists as distinct from God and that everything is identical with, or is a part—or a mode—of an immanent God.

44 Bahá'ís reject any notion of God's immanence and stress His absolute transcendence. This theme is elaborated in *Some Answered Questions* nos. 53–54.

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42 Anthropomorphism is the belief

of mystics<sup>45</sup>—a phrase also adopted in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

#### REVELATION VERSUS APPEARANCE AND INCARNATION

While God is transcendent above all things, His revelation encompasses them. To differentiate revelation from appearance or incarnation, the emanation of existence from its Source can be likened to the rays of the sun illuminating all things. The earth's share of the sun's illumination and the sun's reflection in everything is commensurate with the difference in stations and stages: a mirror reflects the rays of the sun more than a stone does. But the emanation of light from the sun and its association with the mirror does not mean that the sun itself descends from its height and enters into the mirror. Another example can be given: when a carpenter builds a bed, some thought, knowledge, or creativity proceeds from his soul and relates to the material in a specific form commensurate with the properties of the wood. Through the influence of this effusion emanating from the carpenter's soul, the wood takes the form of a bed. So, the existence of the bed demonstrates the existence of the carpenter; it signifies the share of the grace the wood has received from the carpenter's soul. But it can never be said that the carpenter's soul, thought, or knowledge has suffered a decrease and dissolved into the form of the bed,

or exited the carpenter's being and become incarnate in his creation. These examples only serve to illustrate the point and clarify its meaning, but not to discover the truth of the matter. Like all parables, they merit emphasis only to a point. And the point is that the world is not God, it is from God; neither does He enter the world. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

. . . God is immeasurably exalted above all things. Every created being however revealeth His signs which are but emanations from Him and not His Own Self. All these signs are reflected and can be seen in the book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a most great book. Therein every man of insight can perceive that which would lead to the Straight Path and would enable him to attain the Great Announcement. Consider the rays of the sun whose light hath encompassed the world. The rays emanate from the sun and reveal its nature, but are not the sun itself. Whatsoever can be discerned on earth amply demonstrateth the power of God, His knowledge and the outpourings of His bounty, while He Himself is immeasurably exalted above all creatures (*Tablets* 60–61).

He also writes:

[T]he sages have stated: "The uncompounded reality is all things, yet it is not any one thing," and in

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45 For an example, refer to *At-Tajalliyátu'l-Iláhiyyih*.

another instance: “The splendors of the uncompounded reality are visible in all things.” This dependeth upon the eye of the beholder and the view of the observer. They whose sight is keen perceive in all things the evidences of His supreme singleness, inasmuch as all beings manifest the Divine Names. God hath ever been and will forever be sanctified from ascent and descent and transcendent above all limitation, association, and relationship, while all created things exist and are visible in the plane of limitation. (Lawḥ-i-Basíṭatu'l-Ḥaḳíqih, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:141, provisional translation)

He further states:

In this respect, the effulgences emanating from the signs of the uncompounded reality are evident and resplendent in all created things. The intention of the sage was not to state that God is cast into infinite forms of being. Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is He above being cast into any element, being restricted by any limitation, or being associated with anything in the entire creation. He hath from all eternity been immensely exalted beyond all else but Himself and sanctified from all save His own Self. We testify that He is One in His Essence, One in His Attributes and that all are in the grasp of His power which pervadeth all created things.

(Lawḥ-i-Basíṭatu'l-Ḥaḳíqih, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:142, provisional translation)

#### THE APPEARANCE OF GOD'S NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES

The Essence of God—implicit within which, or identical to which, are His attributes—transcends the creation. Without descending from its height, without any decomposition, dissolution, or partition, it is the Source of all grace. The effusion of grace in its emanational procession takes a unique form in each degree of existence and appears differently subject to the limits of each station. Plurality thus appears and the diverse creatures, whose existence emanates from the single Source of all effusion in the invisible world, emerge in the visible world.<sup>46</sup> It is in this world

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46 Ibnul-'Arabí (*Al-Futūḥātu'l-Makkíyyih*, passim; vol. 3, ch. 146; vol. 4, ch. 206; vol. 5, ch. 312) describes the process of God's revelation through which plurality emanates from one and the originated from the pre-existent. Several themes related to this thought, including the objects of God's knowledge, Fixed Entities, the Most Holy Outpouring, and the Holy Outpouring, are explored in several Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith, such as Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and Lawḥ-i-Salmán (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ* 128–160), the Báb's *Tafsír-i-Nubuvvat-i-Khāṣṣih* (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 14:321–384) and *Tafsíru'l-Há'* (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 86:99–154), 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentaries on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure” and on the Basmala (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*

of plurality and diversity that, owing to the different degrees of revelation and the various levels of existence, the names and attributes<sup>47</sup> appear. To each

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1:33–62), as well as His exposition in *Some Answered Questions* no. 82. According to Ibnu'l-'Arabí, God, Who is in a station of Supreme Singleness within His Essence, reveals Himself to His own Essence in a specific revelation known as the Most Holy Outpouring—a revelation which results in God's knowledge of His essential names and attributes as well as of subjects of His knowledge of all things. The subjects of God's knowledge, referred to as Fixed Entities, have a pre-existent intellectual existence in God's knowledge, but no formal existence, and are, therefore, one with His Essence. In this station of Divine Oneness, the whole creation exists in an intellectual multiplicity in God's knowledge. In a secondary revelation, referred to as the Holy Outpouring, the intellectual reality of the world of creation finds formal existence and the entification of the distinctions and degrees of things that once enjoyed unity in God's knowledge manifests itself, through a single revelation, as diversity in their formal existence.

47 Names and attributes both signify the essence of things, albeit differently. In Islamic scholastic theology, a name is a term that refers to the pure essence. Examples of names include God, woman, and human. It also refers to an essence which is characterized by an attribute, such as the All-Knowing and the Almighty, or to an essence which is the source of an action, such as the Sustainer and the Creator. An attribute, however, only signifies a source unbounded by a characterization of an essence, such as knowledge, might, sustenance, and creation.

degree of existence that emanates from the Supreme Singleness, and therefore takes a unique form and enjoys individuality, a name and an attribute is given. All beings, therefore, are the manifestations of the names and attributes of God. It must be stressed that names and attributes are only properties of the world of creation; they do not apply to the unseen realm of God. It is also worth noting that every name and attribute—inasmuch as it signifies, within the limitations of its own being, the effusion of existence that emanates from God—insofar as it evidences the one effusion, is synonymous with every other name and attribute. All the names and attributes indicate a single Reality and this is what is described as the “true appearance of the Divine Unity” in the Bahá'í Writings (*Call* 6:10). These names can be used interchangeably and they can be called upon equally to invoke God: “By whichever name ye will, invoke him, for He hath most excellent names” (Qur'an 17:110, qtd. in *Gems* ¶45).

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

O seeker! Regard not the divine names and attributes as idle fancy. Know thou that all that is created betwixt earth and heaven hath ever been and will continue to be the manifestation of the names of God and the embodiment of His attributes, exalted be His glory. At best, the station of man excelleth and his rank transcendeth those of the rest of creation. Shouldst thou ascend unto the heaven wherein

one seeth no distinction amongst His creatures, thou canst see neither difference nor flaw in the Divine creation and the manifestations of His handiwork. (Lawḥ-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:9, provisional translation)

He further states that “in a sense all things have ever been and shall ever remain the manifestations of the names and attributes of God” (*Tabernacle* 2:9). He also writes:

One of the senses in which God may be described is that insofar as the evidences of His effulgences are manifest in all things, to the least of His signs that are visible on the earth all of His names and attributes are applicable. For the most excellent names that are addressed to it pertain unto that Divine revelation which hath shed its light, for no reason whatever, upon that sign. . . . (*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 144, provisional translation)

The following are excerpts from the Writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that elaborate the above passages:

The originated is powerless to conceive the reality of the pre-existent. Even as He—peace be upon Him—said: “We have failed to recognize Thee as becometh Thy recognition.”<sup>48</sup> But the contingent,

insofar as its existence and conditions are concerned, dependeth upon the grace of the Necessary Being. Therefore, He Who is the Invisible, the Inaccessible, and beyond the reach of mind, shed the light of His names and attributes upon the realities of things. All things take their portion of the grace of God and the revelation of the All-Merciful. “Neither is there aught which doth not celebrate His praise.”<sup>49</sup> (*Khiṭábát* 1:6, provisional translation).

That which we imagine, is not the Reality of God; He, the Unknowable, the Unthinkable, is far beyond the highest conception of man.

All creatures that exist are dependent upon the Divine Bounty. Divine Mercy gives life itself. As the light of the sun shines on the whole world, so the Mercy of the infinite God is shed on all creatures. (*Paris Talks* 5:10–11)

. . . the Essence of Divinity, the Sun of Truth, shines forth upon all horizons and is spreading its rays upon all things. Each creature is the recipient of some portion of that power . . . (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 23)

“No vision taketh in Him, but He

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Muḥammad.

<sup>49</sup> Qur'án 17:44, qtd, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99.

taketh in all vision: He is the Subtile, the All-Informed.”<sup>50</sup>

When, however, thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord’s mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being, with evidences which none will deny save the froward and the unaware. Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy: and none will gainsay this who hath ears to hear, eyes to see, and a mind that is sound.

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Daystar’s splendors, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 19:7–8)

#### THE UNIVERSAL REVELATION

All created beings, because they exist—because they have taken their portion of existence—and are recipients of the outpouring emanating from the Source of existence, are revealers of the splendors of God. In this sense, no distinction can be made among God’s creatures, except the difference in their degrees of existence or in their share of God’s revelation. Seeing some creatures as high or low, as exalted or abased, or as good or evil should not stop us from recognizing them all as recipients of God’s grace and manifestations of His universal revelation. A confession of Divine unity requires us to believe that the source of all being is the Essence of God; that no form of existence is insignificant, trivial, unworthy, or futile; that ugliness, evil, and darkness have no positive existence; and that “there is naught in creation more wondrous than that which already exists.”<sup>51</sup>

Bahá’u’lláh writes:

. . . whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of

50 Qur’án 6:103.

51 A statement attributed to Hermes and quoted in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 46:2.

that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 71–72)

He further states that

. . . all things are the recipients and revealers of the splendors of that ideal King, and that the signs of the revelation of that Sun, the Source of all splendor, exist and are manifest in the mirrors of beings. Nay, were man to gaze with the eye of divine and spiritual discernment, he will readily recognize that nothing whatsoever can exist without the revelation of the splendor of God, the ideal King. Consider how all created things eloquently testify to the revelation of that inner Light within them. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99)

He also writes:

How all-encompassing are the wonders of His boundless grace! Behold how they have pervaded the whole of creation. Such is their virtue that not a single atom in the entire universe can be found which doth not declare the evidences of His might, which doth not glorify His holy Name, or is not expressive of the effulgent light of His unity (*Gleanings* 26:3).

He also asserts: “all things have ever been and will forever be the repositories of the names of God and the treasuries of the mysteries of His handiwork. In every cycle, He maketh manifest from each being that which He willeth and taketh away therefrom that which He desireth” (Lawḥ-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:36, provisional translation). He further states: “in one sense, all things are the signs of God, were ye to ponder over the signs of God in the creation. ‘How many a sign in the heavens and on the earth, upon which they pass, turning aside from it.’<sup>52</sup> The signs of God are apparent in all created things” (*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 35, provisional translation). He also writes:

In every creature of God's creatures, whether of the loftiest or the lowliest of stations—and this loftiness and lowliness are mentioned in relation to the creation—upon all, every name and every attribute is applicable, so long as they are established beneath the shadow of the True One. Otherwise, they are not regarded as possessing any existence, much less any lofty station. (*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 35, provisional translation)

#### RECOGNIZING GOD THROUGH HIS CREATION

It is in this way, in this form, and for this reason that one can recognize God. Although one can never know God, as

He is, in the invisible realm, yet His knowledge is possible in the sense that all things emanate from Him and He has revealed Himself in all beings through this emanational procession. God, as He is in His Essence, has no names or attributes. But every created thing, owing to its very existence, in its limited sense, meaning, and form, testifies to an attribute of God or to one of His most excellent names. God is the Invisible, the Inaccessible, and the Unknowable. As previously stated, the Invisible cannot be known, for if it is known, it can no longer be called the Invisible. The creation, conversely, is in the visible realm and can be known.

What is the creation? It is that which exists. What is the source of this existence? It is the outpouring of grace emanating from God. To know a created thing is, therefore, to find a path to the outpouring emanating from God—to recognize the Invisible in His visible manifestation. This is where God should be sought and found, not in His own Self, which is nameless and placeless. It is in this way that one can make a connection between one's knowledge and God's existence and call it the recognition of God. Otherwise, the Essence of God is nondelimited—namely, free from all association or relationship—and, therefore, unknowable. In short, God cannot be known except through that which is created by Him and visible to us—that which has emanated from His invisible sanctuary and appeared in the visible plane. This is what is meant by the *hadith* “I was a Hidden Treasure. I

wished to be known, therefore I called the creation into being in order to be known”. God would have remained a Hidden Treasure had He not wanted to call the creation into being.

In this sense, God can be found everywhere, seen in everything, and reached through every path. Every created thing sings His praise with its inner tongue, a praise that can be heard throughout the universe with inner ears.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

[A]ll things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God. So potent and universal is this revelation, that it hath encompassed all things, visible and invisible. Thus hath He revealed: “Hath aught else save Thee a power of revelation which is not possessed by Thee, that it could have manifested Thee? Blind is the eye which doth not perceive Thee.”<sup>53</sup> Likewise, hath the eternal King spoken: “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it.”<sup>54</sup> Also in the tradition of Kumayl it is written: “Behold, a light hath shone forth out of the Morn of eternity, and lo! its waves have penetrated

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53 From a prayer attributed to Imám Husayn for the Day of ‘Arafah. See *Al-Majlisí* 142.

54 A statement attributed to Imám ‘Alí.

the inmost reality of all men.”<sup>55</sup>  
(*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 73)

He further writes:

Behold how within all things the portals of the Ridván of God are opened, that seekers may attain the cities of understanding and wisdom, and enter the gardens of knowledge and power. Within every garden they will behold the mystic bride of inner meaning enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment. Most of the verses of the Qur’án indicate, and bear witness to, this spiritual theme. The verse: “Neither is there aught which doth not celebrate His praise”<sup>56</sup> is eloquent testimony thereto; and “We noted all things and wrote them down”,<sup>57</sup> a faithful witness thereof. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99)

He also states:

From the exalted source, and out of the essence of His favor and bounty He hath entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of

creation. The greater the effort exerted for the refinement of this sublime and noble mirror, the more faithfully will it be made to reflect the glory of the names and attributes of God, and reveal the wonders of His signs and knowledge. Every created thing will be enabled (so great is this reflecting power) to reveal the potentialities of its preordained station, will recognize its capacity and limitations, and will testify to the truth that “He, verily, is God; there is none other God besides Him.” (*Gleanings* 124:2)

He also asserts:

Wert thou to scale the inaccessible, lofty heights through the stations of trust and detachment and gaze with thine inner eyes, thou wouldst find this utterance<sup>58</sup> free and detached from the limitations of self and hear the words “He hath known God who hath known anything” with thine inner ears from the voice of the mystic Dove of holiness. For the sign of the revelation of the All-Abiding and the splendors of the manifestation of the Sun of oneness are clearly evident in all things and this is not confined to any one soul. Verily this is undoubtedly the truth,

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55 A statement attributed to Imám ‘Alí.

56 Qur’án 17:44.

57 Qur’án 78:29.

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58 By “this utterance” is meant the *hadíth*, “He hath known God who hath known himself,” as mentioned earlier in this Tablet. See *Majmú‘iy-i-Alváh* 351 for the original-language Tablet.

could ye but understand. (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváh* 353, provisional translation)

He further states: "every man may testify, in himself and by himself, before the Seat of the revelation of his Lord, that there is none other God but Him; and that all may reach that summit of realities where none shall contemplate anything but that he shall perceive God therein" (*Call* 2:1). He also writes: "For naught doth he behold save that he perceiveth God therein. He beholdeth the effulgent glories of God in the lights of His Revelation that have encompassed the Sinai of creation" (*Gems* ¶84). He also states: "Everything is the remembrance of God in all creation, for every created thing is, in its essence, the name of God, and His name, exalted be His glory, is His remembrance amongst men. It hath ever been thus and it will forever remain so" (*Lawḥ-i-Sarráj*, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:62, provisional translation). He further asserts:

All things, insofar as they are related to the One True God, utter the call: "Verily, I am God; there is none other God besides me." It is indubitably clear that this word and this station are not from that being itself, but for the reason that it hath entered beneath the shadow of the True One and hath been accounted of God. Should that relation be severed, that same being will be numbered with the inmates of hell in the sight of God.

(*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 36–37, provisional translation)

In the following passage from one of His Tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates on the above excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and stresses that the utmost extent to which human understanding can know God is reached through reflecting upon the world of creation, particularly in creatures that reflect the effusion of God's outpourings to the greatest degree.

The merciful outpourings of that Divine Essence, however, are vouchsafed unto all beings and it is incumbent upon man to ponder in his heart upon the effusions of the Divine Grace, the soul being counted as one, rather than upon the Divine Essence itself. This is the utmost limit for human understanding. As it hath previously been mentioned, these attributes and perfections that we recount of the Divine Essence, these we have derived from the existence and observation of beings, and it is not that we have comprehended the essence and perfection of God. When we say that the Divine Essence understandeth and is free, we do not mean that we have discovered the Divine Will and Purpose, but rather that we have acquired knowledge of them through the Divine Grace revealed and manifested in the realities of things. ("Tablet")

DIFFERENCE IN DEGREES  
OF REVELATION

It was previously mentioned that the created things occupy various stations on the continuum of existence and, as such, reflect various degrees of the divine revelation. This results in different degrees of nearness and remoteness in relation to the Source of revelation.<sup>59</sup>

Each being, therefore, occupies a unique position by measure of the relative perfection it possesses and lies nearer to or further from the absolute perfection that is the world of God. Every created being, then, testifies to the existence of God commensurate with its rank: creatures that enjoy a greater perfection—that reflect the existence and the divine revelation more intensely—paint a fuller picture of the existence of God. Through them and in them God can be found more easily. For example, the sun shines upon the stone, water, and mirror, but the intensity of its reflection in them varies commensurate with their differing degrees. Therefore, if the sun could not be seen, it would be known better through its reflection in the mirror than in the stone.

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

[T]he reality of Divinity . . . has bestowed its bounties upon all kingdoms of the phenomenal

world, and evidences of spiritual manifestation are witnessed throughout the realms of contingent existence. The lights of God illumine the world of man, even as the effulgences of the sun shine gloriously upon the material creation. The Sun of Reality is one; its bestowal is one; its heat is one; its rays are one; it shines upon all the phenomenal world, but the capacity for comprehending it differs according to the kingdoms, each kingdom receiving the light and bounty of the eternal Sun according to its capacity. The black stone receives the light of the material sun; the trees and animals likewise are recipients of it. All exist and are developed by that one bounty. (*Promulgation* 62:3)

He also writes:

Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun’s rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.

Shouldst thou, however, turn thy gaze unto a Mirror, brilliant, stainless, and pure, wherein the divine Beauty is reflected, therein wilt thou find the Sun shining with Its rays, Its heat, Its disc, Its fair form all entire. For each separate entity possesseth its allotted portion of the solar light and telleth of the Sun. . . . (*Selections* 19:9–10)

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59 Refer to “Proximity and Remoteness” in this essay for a discussion of the true meaning of these terms and their relation to the transcendence of God above time, place, relationship, and direction.

MAN IS THE NOBLEST  
OF ALL CREATED THINGS

In this hierarchy, human existence possesses the highest degree of perfection. This is an indisputable fact, because the human reality embodies all the degrees of existence. One aspect of human existence, like the mineral, is physical: it has spatial extension, duration, weight, mass, shape, dimension, inertia, color, smell, taste, heat, motion, and other similar properties. Another aspect of his existence, like the vegetable, manifests signs of life, such as consumption of food, respiration, growth, reproduction, birth, and death. Yet another aspect of his existence, like the animal, is the source of sense perception, cognitive ability, and voluntary movement—albeit in the limited sense of natural reaction not originating in rational choice, in the case of the animal.

In addition to all these properties and attributes, the human existence has a special human aspect that other creatures do not have. Human beings comprehend universal principles and deduce the unknown from the known. They subdue nature. They have intellect, understanding, and reason. They possess the power of speech, which enables them to translate abstract concepts into words and sentences, and to compose and analyze them. They have moral conscience and choice and, as a result, feel responsible for their words and actions. They are cognizant of the passage of time, revive the past in the present, and connect the present to the

future. They have belief and faith. They consider themselves to be capable of change, renewal, progress, and refinement, and leave for posterity the fruits of their efforts in transforming or advancing their lives, through education. Their talents express their attraction to beauty and produce fine arts. Their intellect manifests their love for the truth and generates sciences and arts. Their conscience displays their desire for good and drives virtuous deeds. Their faith is in the Transcendent Perfection that is beyond nature. To express in a single term what all these privileges and distinctions describe, we state that they have rational soul, or human spirit.

Some, like materialists and natural scientists, might disagree with this assertion, which requires one to accept the natural distinction of the human race. They may argue, for example, that all these properties are extensions of those in the mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds, or that they represent the current stage in the essential process of the evolution of matter. Be that as it may, this essay does not engage in this discussion, but presents the theological tenets of the Bahá'í view of God and revelation. Even materialists cannot deny the fact that at the present time, man is the noblest and most perfect of all created things, even if they consider this to be the result of a gradual evolution of animal life.

The following passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh state that the human existence ranks the highest in the levels of perfection and is the recipient of the most intense degree of

the effusions of existence in the emanational procession:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation—even as is recorded and evident in the holy tradition.<sup>60</sup> He favored man with the bounteous robe of “We, verily, created man in the most excellent form”<sup>61</sup> and honored him with the glorious mantle of “Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators!”<sup>62,63</sup>

Man, the noblest and most perfect of all created things, excelleth them all in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 73)

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Each creature is the recipient of some portion of that power, and man, who contains the perfection of the mineral, the

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60 This is a reference to the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure.”

61 Qur’án 95:4.

62 Qur’án 23:14.

63 Provisional translation of an excerpt from an Arabic-Persian Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh, published in *Majmú’iy-i-Álváh* 339. The first sentence can also be found in *Gleanings* 27:2.

vegetable and animal, as well as his own distinctive qualities, has become the noblest of created beings. Therefore, he encompasses all created things, ... especially the perfect man.”<sup>64</sup> He further says:

Man possesses all the perfections of the world of creation: the mineral body, the vegetable tenderness, and the animal senses. In addition, he is the recipient of the perfections of the divine bounties. There can be no doubt that he is the noblest of all created things. His powers encompass the realities of existence and discover the mysteries of the universe. He unveils their attributes and the secrets concealed within them, draws them from the invisible to the visible plane, and offers them for the benefit of the minds and intellects. (*Khiṭábát* 1:6, provisional translation)

He also states:

There is no doubt then, that of all created beings man is the nearest to the nature of God, and therefore receives a greater gift of the Divine Bounty.

The mineral kingdom possesses the power of existing. The plant has the power of existing and

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64 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, published in *Khiṭábát* 1:28. The first sentence can also be found in *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 23.

growing. The animal, in addition to existence and growth, has the capacity of moving about, and the use of the faculties of the senses. In the human kingdom we find all the attributes of the lower worlds, with much more added thereto. Man is the sum of every previous creation, for he contains them all.

To man is given the special gift of the intellect by which he is able to receive a larger share of the light Divine. (*Paris Talks* 5:13–15)

#### MAN IS THE MANIFESTATION OF THE DIVINE NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES

Because man is the noblest of all created things and is distinguished from all the other creatures, he receives a greater share of the effusion of existence, of God's revelation in the world of creation. As previously stated, all created things manifest some aspects of God's names, attributes, and perfections according to their various degrees and limits of existence. Human beings, however, encompass all created things and possess all their perfections, and therefore manifest all the divine names, attributes, and perfections.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it

a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty. (*Gleanings* 27:2)

He also states:

To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery."<sup>65</sup> Manifest are the verses that have been repeatedly revealed in all the heavenly Books and the holy Scriptures, expressive of this most subtle and lofty theme. Even as He hath revealed: "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves."<sup>66</sup> Again He saith: "And also in your own selves: will ye not then behold the signs of God?"<sup>67</sup> And yet again He revealeth: "And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves."<sup>68</sup> In this connection, He Who is the eternal

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65 Words of Muḥammad.

66 Qur'án 41:53.

67 Qur'án 51:21.

68 Qur'án 59:19.

King—may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him—hath spoken: “He hath known God who hath known himself.”<sup>69</sup> (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 72).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

All created things are resplendent signs of God. For instance, the rays of the sun shine upon all earthly things, yet the light that falls upon the plains, the mountains, the trees and fruits is only in such measure as to make them visible, to ensure their growth, and to cause them to attain the object of their existence. The Perfect Man, however, is even as a clear mirror in which the Sun of Truth is revealed and manifested in the fullness of its attributes and perfections. (*Some Answered Questions* 27:5)

He also states:

In the Old Testament we read that God said, “Let us make man in Our own image.” In the Gospel, Christ said, “I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.”<sup>70</sup> Muḥammad says, “Man is my Mystery and I am his.” Bahá’u’lláh writes that God says, “Thy heart is My home; purify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation.

All these sacred words show us that man is made in God’s image . . . .<sup>71</sup>

This indicates that while confessing the transcendence of God’s station, sanctifying Him from the comprehension of all, and exalting Him above all regress, incarnation, and descent, the Bahá’í Writings consider the human heart to be the dawning-place of the revelation of God, the habitation of His throne, and the seat of His establishment. They urge human beings to sanctify and refine this holy seat and cleanse it from the defilement of self and passion so that the light of God may shine upon it and it may mirror forth His everlasting beauty. It is in this sense that man can find God within himself and witness His beauty by turning to his own self.

Bahá’u’lláh writes: “O Son of Man! The temple of being is My throne; cleanse it of all things, that there I may be established and there I may abide” (Arabic Hidden Words no. 58). He also writes: “O Son of Being! Thy heart is

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71 From a talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which He refers to statements from the Writings and utterances of Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, and Bahá’u’lláh. The early English translation of this talk is published in *Paris Talks* ch. 5. In this talk, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not directly quoting these Writings and utterances, although in this early translation published in *Paris Talks* ch. 5 they appear in quotation marks. This early translation is not completely accurate, so it has been reproduced here with a minor modification.

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69 An Islamic tradition.

70 John 14:11.

My home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation” (Arabic Hidden Words no. 59). He further writes: “O Son of Man! Put thy hand into My bosom, that I may rise above thee, radiant and resplendent” (Arabic Hidden Words no. 60). He also states:

God, exalted be His glory and magnified be His loftiness, hath, from time immemorial even unto this day, been sanctified above ascent and descent. Every place that is cleansed from the dust of self and the thistles of passion, however, will be illumined by the light of His effulgence. It behooves everyone to strive with the utmost endeavor to attain unto this transcendent and most sublime station. (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 18:367, provisional translation)

He also writes: “Praise be unto God Who . . . hath made the hearts of His chosen ones a throne for the establishment of His beauty and a mirror to attest to the glory of His sovereignty” (*Safíniy-i-'Irfán* 12:12, provisional translation). In the following passage, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explains this concept further:

The recognition of God is through the evidences of His names and attributes which are the resplendent signs of His Essence and the manifestations of God’s perfections in the realities of things. The reality of man, in the sense

that it is that which it is, is verily a distinguished sign that singeth the praise of his Creator, revealeth the mysteries of his Maker, and expoundeth the evidences of His consummate wisdom enshrined therein. Exalted is He Who created it, fashioned it, and shaped it: “And also in your own selves: will ye not then behold the signs of God?”<sup>72</sup> . . . This knowledge is to recognize the signs of the Kingdom which are treasured within the realities of the souls and the worlds: “We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves, until it become plain to them that it is the truth”<sup>73</sup>. . . . Verily, when the dayspring of guidance, ‘Alí—peace be upon him—looked upon the effects, the signs, and the mysteries enshrined within the realities of things, then repeated the gaze and saw not a single flaw, he said: “If the veil were lifted, my certitude would in no wise increase.” (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 1:134–36, provisional translation)

#### CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this essay, we explored God’s sanctity and transcendence at length. In several subsequent occasions, we again elaborated on this key theme in Bahá'í belief in Divine

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<sup>72</sup> Qur’án 51:21, qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 72.

<sup>73</sup> Qur’án 41:53, qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Call* 2:24.

unity. We finally stressed that the emanation of beings from God and His revelation in them is vastly different from incarnation, anthropomorphism, appearance, and descent.

Nevertheless, at the conclusion of this essay we cite again several passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. This, we hope, would assist the readers to rest assured that God has decreed that belief in His sanctity and transcendence be a focal point of the teachings in this Dispensation, that no uncertainty or misunderstanding would lead to a belief in God's incarnation or in His immanence and descent in the contingent world.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Let no one imagine that by Our assertion that all created things are the signs of the revelation of God is meant that—God forbid—all men, be they good or evil, pious or infidel, are equal in the sight of God. Nor doth it imply that the Divine Being—magnified be His name and exalted be His glory—is, under any circumstances, comparable unto men, or can, in any way, be associated with His creatures. Such an error hath been committed by certain foolish ones who, after having ascended into the heavens of their idle fancies, have interpreted Divine Unity to mean that all created things are the signs of God, and that, consequently, there is no distinction whatsoever between them. Some have even outstripped them by

maintaining that these signs are peers and partners of God Himself. Gracious God! He, verily, is one and indivisible; one in His essence, one in His attributes. Everything besides Him is as nothing when brought face to face with the resplendent revelation of but one of His names, with no more than the faintest intimation of His glory—how much less when confronted with His own Self!

By the righteousness of My name, the All-Merciful! The Pen of the Most High trembleth with a great trembling and is sore shaken at the revelation of these words. How puny and insignificant is the evanescent drop when compared with the waves and billows of God's limitless and everlasting Ocean, and how utterly contemptible must every contingent and perishable thing appear when brought face to face with the uncreated, the unspeakable glory of the Eternal! We implore pardon of God, the All-Powerful, for them that entertain such beliefs, and give utterance to such words. Say: O people! How can a fleeting fancy compare with the Self-Subsisting, and how can the Creator be likened unto His creatures, who are but as the script of His Pen? Nay, His script excelleth all things, and is sanctified from, and immeasurably exalted above, all creatures. (*Gleanings* 93:7–8)

These passages stress the transcendence of the Essence of God, but also state another fact: that all created beings receive different degrees of the divine revelation and rank differently in their reflection of God's names and attributes; that the highest degree and rank belong to human beings; and that there are different degrees and ranks among human beings as well. Not everyone, simply by virtue of membership in the human race, reflects all of God's attributes, manifests all the divine names, or mirrors forth His transcendent existence. Not everyone is able to attain to this station. That is why, as quoted above, Bahá'u'lláh states: "Let no one imagine that by Our assertion that all created things are the signs of the revelation of God is meant that—God forbid—all men, be they good or evil, pious or infidel, are equal in the sight of God. ... Such an error hath been committed by certain foolish ones who, after having ascended into the heavens of their idle fancies, have interpreted Divine Unity to mean that all created things are the signs of God, and that, consequently, there is no distinction whatsoever between them."

Only the heart of the perfect man can be the throne of the All-Merciful. Only the noblest soul can find God within. The people of religion believe that the noblest of all human beings are the Manifestations of God. Only They manifest in the highest degree of perfection the effusion of existence emanating from the transcendent Source. Only They reflect God's everlasting

beauty. In the kingdom of Revelation<sup>74</sup> and the world of creation, where there is no access to the invisible realm of God, He can be found only through His Manifestations, so that no ordinary human being may be overcome with greed, ignore the difference in stations, use the pretext of humanity to claim divinity, and thus sink to degradation: "We, verily, created man in the most excellent form, then caused him to sink into the lowest abyss of degradation" (Qur'án 95:4).

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74 "The kingdom of Revelation" refers to the realm of the reality of the Manifestations of God as the intermediary between the world of God and the world of creation. It is referred to as "the realm of divine Revelation" in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 128 and "the Kingdom of His Cause" in *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶1.

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## The Prayer Savant

MARK JARMAN

On a yellow legal pad  
she wrote her rows of names  
with a big carpenter's pencil  
and made a sunny garden  
of the block graphite letters.  
Her parents brought people to her  
one at a time through the day.  
If you came to her with a name  
and she caught something about you  
with her cockeyed mask of attention  
she would write your name down too.  
And if you left her, feeling poorly,  
I have heard from witnesses,  
later on in the day  
you might feel a sudden lightening.  
She sat in her childhood bedroom  
with Burl Ives on her record player  
singing "Big Rock Candy Mountain"  
and praying through her list,  
praying through every name  
and the names from the day before  
and the day before that and before  
and never forgot a name.  
She remembered no one's face  
but she never forgot a name.  
Her parents had given her this  
condition and occupation.  
It was how they lived with themselves  
and how their prayer was answered.

## Biographical Notes

VARGHA BOLODO-TAEFI holds a BA in advanced Bahá'í studies and a PhD in politics and international affairs. He has worked across public and private sectors in trade and investment policy. His research interests include Bahá'í economics, Bahá'í theology, phenomenology of religion, asymmetric conflict, coercive diplomacy, and terrorism. He is currently serving in the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre.

MARGARET BREMNER: Using techniques such as eco-dyeing, string-pulling, and washes, I create surfaces with random markings in which I search for imagery. Inspired by what I notice around me, I usually find foliage, skies, mountains, and buildings. As the imagery is rooted in mystery, the subjects are necessarily abstracted. Through my eyes and hands, using mixed media, they become wonky and whimsical and bursting with embellishment. I do not plan the work in advance, preferring to move with inspiration—knowing that there are no mistakes, just opportunities—to convey a joyful spirit through intricate detail and patterning.

AMROLLAH HEMMAT is the coauthor of four volumes of poetry with John S. Hatcher and books and educational material on Arabic grammar. He has authored articles on translation,

hermeneutics, and discourse. His education includes a graduate degree from the Johns Hopkins University in Applied Behavioral Science and a PhD in Communication from the University of South Florida. His doctoral dissertation focuses on the interpretation and translation of religious and mystical texts. He is currently the Vice President of Global Discourse Society, academic consultant to universities, and a frequent keynote speaker at academic conferences. His current research includes translation studies, hermeneutics, and intercultural communication.

MARK JARMAN, poet and essayist, is the author of numerous collections of poetry including *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and most recently *The Heronry*, from Sarabande Books. His book of essays about poetry, *Dailiness*, was recently published by Paul Dry Books. He is Centennial Professor of English at Vanderbilt University.

RUDY UMANS: The goal of my photographs is that the subject, the viewer, and the photographer become one. At best, I feel an intimacy with the subject that I try to translate into two dimensions. Pinhole photography (an empty box with a tiny hole and film) is for me the most intimate form of photography



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RUDY UMANS

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