

The Maid of Heaven, the Image of Sophia, and the Logos: Personification of the Spirit of God in Scripture and Sacred Literature

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Abstract

The Logos in Christianity and the Maiden who personified the Spirit of God within Bahá'u'lláh can be equated as one and the same eternal reality. Christians have often noted the similarities between the Logos and the personified image of wisdom (or Sophia) in Proverbs and the deuterocanonical books. In many ways, both the characteristics of the Logos and the image of Sophia can be seen combined in the feminine personification of the Most Great Spirit in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. This article examines some of the corollaries between these three expressions of divine emanation.

Résumé

Le Logos de la chrétienté et le nom qui personnifie l'esprit de Dieu chez Bahá'u'lláh peuvent représenter la même réalité éternelle. Les chrétiens ont souvent remarqué des ressemblances entre le Logos et l'image personnifiée de la sagesse (ou Sophia) dans les proverbes et les livres deutécanoniques. Dans les écrits de Bahá'u'lláh, nous pouvons voir, sous plusieurs aspects, que la personification féminine du Très Grand Esprit est associée aux deux: caractéristiques du Logos et de l'image de Sophia. Cet article étudie certains corollaires entre ces trois expressions d'émanation divine.

Resumen

El Logos en la cristiandad y la Doncella que personificó el Espíritu de Dios entrafado en Bahá'u'lláh pueden verse como la misma realidad eterna. Los cristianos con frecuencia han visto las similitudes entre el Logos y la imagen personificada de la sabiduría, llamada Sofía, en los Proverbios y los tomos deuteroacanónicos. En formas variadas, tanto las características del Logos como la imagen de Sofía pueden verse combinadas en la personificación femenina del Mas Grande Espíritu en los escritos de Bahá'u'lláh. Esta disertación analiza los efectos que conectan estas tres expresiones de emanación divina.

Images of angels or celestial beings are common to many ancient religious traditions. In some instances these celestial beings are spoken of in terms expressive of female gender. In ancient Greece there is, for example, the Mother Goddess; in Nordic religion, the Valkyries; in the Jewish tradition there is the feminine personification of wisdom. The Qur'án seems to expand on the Hebrew and Christian concept of angels to form the feminine imagery of *húris*,¹ heavenly companions for faithful male believers:

¹ 1. *Hur*, from pl. of *hawra*, "suggesting the general idea of 'whiteness', *hawra* is applied more particularly to the very large eye of the gazelle or the oryx, the clear whiteness of which arises from the contrast with the blackness of the pupil and the iris; by extension, *hawra* signifies a woman whose big black eyes are in contrast to their 'whites' and to the whiteness of the skin" (*Encyclopedia of Islam* 3:581).

“For the righteous is a beautiful place of (final) return” (38:49), an “eternal home” (3:15) with “companions pure (and holy)” (2:25, 3:15, 4:57, 43:70), “chaste women restraining their glances, (companions) of equal age” (38:49–52, 56:72, 56:36, 52:20, 78:34), “virgin-pure (and undefiled)” (56:36) whom “no man or Jinn before them has touched” (55:56, 74) “fair (companions), good and beautiful” (55:70) “with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes” (44:54, 37:48ff., 52:20, 56:22), “like unto Pearls well-guarded” (56:23) “a reward for the deeds of their past life” (56:24) “dressed in fine silk and rich brocade, they will face each other” (44:53), in “pavilions” (55:72) “reclining on green cushions and rich carpets of beauty.” (55:76)²

These images of maidens are further elaborated in the traditions of Islam, among which Ghazálí records the following:

A man once asked, “O Emissary of God [Muḥammad]! Shall the people of Heaven enjoy carnal relations?” and he replied, “Every man therein shall be given in a single day the capacity of seventy of you”. . . . Said the Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him peace), “A single man in Heaven shall wed five hundred houris, four thousand virgins, and eight thousand deflowered women, and shall embrace each one of them for a period equal to his lifetime in the world.” (*Remembrance* 245)

These quranic verses and traditions have been interpreted both literally and symbolically.³ Reference to the heavenly *hurís* can also be found in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings:

As to Paradise: It is a reality and there can be no doubt about it, and now in this world it is realized through love of Me and My good-pleasure. Whosoever attaineth unto it God will aid him in this world below, and after death He will enable him to gain admittance into Paradise whose vastness is as that of heaven and earth. Therein the Maids of glory and holiness will wait upon him in the daytime and in the night season, while the day-star of the unfading beauty of his Lord will at all times shed its radiance upon him and he will shine so brightly that no one shall bear to gaze at him. Such is the dispensation of Providence, yet the people are shut out by a grievous veil. Likewise apprehend thou the nature of hell-fire and be of them that truly believe. (*Tablets* 189, *cf. Gleanings* 156)

In Bahá’u’lláh’s *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude), these maids of heaven (Arabic, *hurís*) are given a metaphorical meaning signifying religious understanding or truth. The virginity of the *hurís*, expounded in Islamic tradition, is used by Bahá’u’lláh to symbolize the untouched or undiscovered nature of the truth the maidens personify (or signify). Bahá’u’lláh writes:

Notwithstanding all that We have mentioned, how innumerable are the pearls which have remained unpierced in the shell of Our heart! How many the hurls of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom! None hath yet approached them;— *hurís*, “whom no man nor spirit hath touched before” [Qur’án

² 2. The Qur’án also states those “who believe and whose families follow them in Faith,—to them shall we join their families” (52:21). (All references to the Qur’án are from Yusuf Alí’s translation.)

³ 3. See *The Holy Qur’án*, Yusuf Alí, notes 4728–29, 5053.

55:56]. Notwithstanding all that hath been said, it seemeth as if not one letter or Our purpose hath been uttered, nor a single sign divulged concerning Our object. When will a faithful seeker be found who will don the garb of pilgrimage, attain the Ka‘bih of the heart’s desire, and, without ear or tongue, discover the mysteries of divine utterance?

By these luminous, these conclusive, and lucid statements, the meaning of “heaven” in the aforementioned verse hath thus been made clear and evident. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70–71)

In another passage, Bahá’u’lláh indicates that the *húrís* are *spiritual meanings* clothed in words: He has “summoned the Maids of Heaven to emerge from behind the veil of concealment, and have clothed them with these words of Mine—words of consummate power and wisdom” (*Gleanings* 327–28). And again, in another passage Baha’u’llah refers to “the beauties of divine mystery which are hidden within the chambers of utterance in the Paradise of true Understanding” (*Tablets* 106).⁴ This metaphorical use of the quranic term *húrís*, or maids of heaven, which appears primarily in the Qur’án’s eschatological passages is, not surprisingly, used in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* in the context of Baha’u’llah’s explanation of the meaning of the term *heaven* as it appears in Christian and Islamic prophecy. Presumably, this particular meaning is both applicable to personal “end-times” (the immediate hereafter, when the individual believer attains a heightened spiritual understanding and peace) and the collective historical “end-times” on earth (the culmination of prophecy when the world as a whole reaches a level which can be characterized as heaven on earth).

Parallels between the Maid of Heaven and the Image of Sophia

The intensely male-dominated culture of Arabia may offer a reason for Muḥammad’s use of attractive feminine imagery, and it can be argued that Bahá’u’lláh’s imagery is an extension of the same. This seems likely in many cases, but Bahá’u’lláh may also be drawing on other sources, which could be a reason behind the fuller use of such imagery as it appears in some of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings.

Most notably, what is missing in quranic imagery and the traditions recorded by Ghazálí is a singular Maid of Heaven who seems to occupy the top of a hierarchy. Two examples recur in the existing English translations of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. The foremost involves the Spirit of God, or Most Great Spirit, which is personified as the Maid of Heaven. She is presented as the one who announces the Revelation of God to humankind in the *Síyáh-Chál*. Thereafter, she appears in various contexts in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, such as the Tablet of the Holy Mariner. The second example is the virtue of trustworthiness, which is personified as a celestial “beauty.” That Bahá’u’lláh intends these two images to be the same or separate is not directly suggested in the texts, but it seems reasonable that the two are in some senses one inseparable reality or aspects of the same reality.

With reference to the Maid of Heaven who appears to Bahá’u’lláh in the *Síyáh-Chál*, the fact that the Maiden is the bearer of the Revelation of God to the Manifestation immediately bestows on her a prominence distinct from the description of the *húrís* in the Qur’án. In this context, the

⁴ For other references to the Maids of Heaven (plural) in English, see Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 32, 135–36, 156.

Maid of Heaven takes on characteristics more like the description of “wisdom” eulogized in the Hebrew and apocryphal wisdom literature, notably the book of Proverbs and the apocryphal books of Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom, also called the Wisdom of Solomon.⁵

For example, in the book of Wisdom we find a lengthy eulogy to wisdom (Greek: *sophia*). In this description or eulogy, *sophia* is personified into a feminine celestial being, a preexistent, eternal, and luminous emanation from God, who is active in the redemption of humankind throughout history. This place of central prominence greatly outdistances the quranic description of the celestial *húrís* and is much closer to Bahá’u’lláh’s description of the Maid of Heaven. As will be shown later, further corollaries between the Maid of Heaven and Sophia suggest a link exists between the symbols.

In one passage, Bahá’u’lláh writes a type of eulogy to the Maid of Heaven, wherein God, or Bahá’u’lláh as Manifestation, instructs the Maiden. The Maid of Heaven appears to represent the Revelation of God. This reference, one of the longest references to the Maid of Heaven translated into English, contains many parallels to the personification of Wisdom in the Wisdom literature. The references to the Maiden begin with these opening lines:

Say: The Revelation sent down by God hath most surely been repealed. . . .
Say: Step out of Thy holy chamber, O Maid of Heaven, inmate of the Exalted Paradise! (*Gleanings* 282)⁶

This passage suggests Solomon’s prayer in the book of Wisdom, wherein he asked God, “Grant me Wisdom, consort of your throne.” In the following verse, he again asked, “Despatch her from the holy heavens, send her forth from your throne of glory” (Wis. 7:10).⁷ Bahá’u’lláh then writes:

Drape thyself in whatever manner pleaseth Thee in the silken Vesture of Immortality, and put on, in the name of the All-Glorious, the broidered Robe of Light. (*Gleanings* 282–83)

Here, the image emphasizes light, which is a dominating attribute of Sophia in Wisdom literature. Solomon says, “I loved her more than health or beauty, preferred her to the light, since

⁵ The Wisdom of Solomon has been traditionally regarded as apocryphal and in the nineteenth century was excluded from most Protestant editions of the Bible. This was mainly because the book was attributed to the Old Testament period, yet did not exist in Hebrew nor did it appear to be regarded as canonical by the Jews. Catholics and other Christians have continued to include it in the canon, although as Deuterocanonical. Recent discoveries among the Dead Sea Scrolls have included Hebrew editions of the Deuterocanonical text Ecclesiasticus, attributed by tradition to Ben Sira, and evidence that some Jews regarded it as scripture. (See M. R. Lehmann, “Ben Sira and the Qumran Literature” and “11Q PS^a and Ben Sira.”). The canonicity of the book of Wisdom is, however, not essential to the question as to whether or not there is a plausible correlation with Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. The value of the metaphorical language can be viewed primarily in relation to the specific meaning Bahá’u’lláh is conveying in the context of His own claims.

⁶ 6. In the Tablet of the Holy Mariner, she occupies a position in a hierarchy of celestial beings: “Thereupon she summoned unto herself one maiden from her handmaidens. . . . And commanded her: ‘Descend into space from the mansions of eternity’” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 225). In Proverbs, “She has dispatched her maidservants and proclaimed from the heights of the city” (Prov. 9:3).

⁷ All biblical references are from the *Jerusalem Bible* except where otherwise stated.

her radiance never sleeps” (Wis. 7: 10). And again, he says, “She is indeed more splendid than the sun, she outshines all the constellations” (Wis. 7:29). Bahá’u’lláh continues:

Hear, then, the sweet, the wondrous accent of the Voice that cometh from the Throne of Thy Lord, the Inaccessible, the Most High. Unveil Thy face, and manifest the beauty of the black-eyed Damsel, and suffer not the servants of God to be deprived of the light of Thy shining countenance. Grieve not if Thou hearest the sighs of the dwellers of the earth, or the voice of the lamentation of the denizens of heaven. Leave them to perish on the dust of extinction [*cf.* Prov. 1:26:29]. Let them be reduced to nothingness, inasmuch as the flame of hatred hath been kindled within their breasts [*cf.* Prov. 1:29–30]. Intone, then, before the face of the peoples of earth and heaven, and in a most melodious voice, the anthem of praise, for a remembrance of Him Who is the King of the names and attributes of God [*cf.* Wis. 8:1–4, 32ff.]. Thus have We decreed Thy destiny. Well able are We to achieve Our purpose. (*Gleanings* 283)

In these verses, there is again the relationship between the Maid of Heaven and the throne of the Most High found in the book of Wisdom (9:4,10) followed by the attribute of luminosity. Bahá’u’lláh then refers to the lamentations of the peoples of the earth and instructs her to be unmoved by it. Their suffering is the result of their own hatred. Her mission is to sing the praises of God. All the characteristics found in this sequence can be seen in the book of Proverbs. In both chapters 1 and 8 of Proverbs, Wisdom (Sophia) calls out to the peoples of the earth (1:20f, 8:1–4). In chapter 1, the people are presented as heedless: “I have called and you have refused me” (1:24), and since they have failed to heed her warnings and advice (1:25), she says she will not answer them when distress and sorrow befalls them:

Then they will call me, but I shall not answer, they will look eagerly for me and will not find me. They have hated knowledge, they have not chosen the fear of Yahweh, they have taken no notice of my advice, they have spurned all my warnings: so they will have to eat the fruits of their own ways of life, and choke themselves with their own scheming. (Prov. 1:28–31)

These verses are then followed by promises to those who do heed her words and follow God’s commandments.

In Bahá’u’lláh’s description, the Maid of Heaven is next presented as the means through which God’s image can be reflected in all created things. The verses seem to suggest that this is accomplished through her purity:

Beware that Thou divest not Thyself, Thou Who art the Essence of Purity, of Thy robe of effulgent glory. Nay, enrich Thyself increasingly, in the kingdom of creation, with the incorruptible vestures of Thy God, that the beauteous image of the Almighty may be reflected through Thee in all created things and the grace of Thy Lord be infused in the plenitude of its power into the entire creation. (*Gleanings* 283)

There are three points in these verses that again appear in the description of Sophia: her purity, her ability to reflect the image of the Almighty, and her being as an active agent in the renewal of humankind. In the book of Wisdom these characteristics are described as follows:

For Wisdom is quicker to move than any motion; she is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things. She is a breath of the power of God, pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; so nothing impure can find its way into her. For she is a reflection of the eternal light, untarnished mirror of God's active power, and image of his goodness. Although she is alone, she can do everything; herself unchanging, she renews the world, and generation after generation. (Wis. 7:24–27)

In the following verses, Bahá'u'lláh states that the Maiden has from time immemorial been created as a sacrifice for those who love the Lord:

If Thou smellest from any one the smell of the love of Thy Lord, offer up Thyself for him, for We have created Thee to this end, and have covenanted with Thee, from time immemorial, and in the presence of the congregation of Our well-favored ones, for this very purpose. (*Gleanings* 283–84)

This covenant and purpose of the Maiden seems to have a further parallel in the book of Wisdom. Having presented fully her timelessness and character (Wis. ch. 7), the text then recites how she has been active in the redemption of humankind throughout history.⁸ Beginning with chapter 10, she is presented as the one who “protected the first man to be fashioned” (10:1), who saved Noah from the flood, preserved Abraham “blameless. before God” (10:5), saved Lot, Jacob, and so on. All these persons clearly fit the criterion established in Bahá'u'lláh's verse, “If Thou smellest from any one the smell of the love of Thy Lord, offer up Thyself for him.”

Bahá'u'lláh's description closes with the Maid of Heaven herself praising the theophany in Bahá'u'lláh:

Be not impatient if the blind in heart hurl down the shafts of their idle fancies upon Thee. Leave them to themselves, for they follow the promptings of the evil ones.

Cry out before the gaze of the dwellers of 'heaven and of earth: I am the Maid of Heaven, the Offspring begotten by the Spirit of Bahá. My habitation is the Mansion of His Name, the All-Glorious. Before the Concourse on high I was adorned with the ornament of His names. I was wrapt within the veil of an inviolable security, and lay hidden from the eyes of men. Methinks that I heard a Voice or divine and incomparable sweetness, proceeding from the right hand of the God of Mercy, and lo, the whole Paradise stirred and trembled before Me, in its longing to hear its accents, and gaze on the beauty of Him that uttered them. Thus have We revealed in this luminous Tablet, and in the sweetest of languages, the verses which the Tongue of Eternity was moved to utter in the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'. (*Gleanings* 284)

⁸ 8. In Bahá'u'lláh's early writings, the Maid of Heaven is often spoken of in close proximity to references that contain historical overviews of past acts of redemptive suffering. See, for example, Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 118, 120–21.

This description is again shared with the personification of Sophia in the Wisdom literature in that the Maid of Heaven is figuratively presented as a personified reality with the attribute of speech (Prov. 1:20, 8:1–4) and engaging in the proclamation of God’s revelation (Prov. 8:22ff.).

The Appearance in the Síyáh-Chál

Highlighting the central aspects of Bahá’u’lláh’s experience in the Síyáh-Chál (1852), Shoghi Effendi forms a composite of accounts from Bahá’u’lláh’s own writings, the first part of which is as follows:

at so critical an hour and under such appalling circumstances the “*Most Great Spirit*,” as designated by Himself, and symbolized in the Zoroastrian, the Mosaic, the Christian, and Muḥammadan Dispensations by the Sacred Fire, the Burning Bush, the Dove and the Angel Gabriel respectively, descended upon, and revealed itself, personated by a “*Maiden*,” to the agonized soul of Bahá’u’lláh.

“*One night in a dream*,” He Himself, calling to mind, in the evening of His life, the first stirrings of God’s Revelation within His soul, has written, “*these exalted words were heard on every side: ‘Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Ere long will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.’*” (God Passes By 101)

This passage is one of several where Shoghi Effendi refers to Bahá’u’lláh’s experience in the Síyáh-Chál and draws parallels with similar traditions recorded in the sacred histories of past religions. This particular account of the “dream,” which Shoghi Effendi indicates was written by Bahá’u’lláh in the “evening of His life” can be found in a brief account of “past events” that Bahá’u’lláh records in *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* addressed to Shaykh Muḥammad Taqíy-i-Najafí (*Epistle* 19). In this account, there is no description of the Maiden. The second selection that Shoghi Effendi cites contains a direct reference to the Maiden:

In His Súratu’l-Haykal (the Súrih of the Temple) He thus describes those breathless moments when the Maiden, symbolizing the “*Most Great Spirit*” proclaimed His mission to the entire creation: “*While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden—the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord—suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul that her countenance shone with the ornament of the good-pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God’s honored servants. Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: ‘By God! This is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, and yet ye comprehend not. This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could ye but understand. This is the Mystery of God and His Treasure, the Cause of God and His glory unto all who are in the kingdoms of*

Revelation and of creation, if ye be of them that perceive.” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 101–2; cf. *Citadel of Faith* 101)

In this account, the Most Great Spirit is personified as a feminine celestial being, characterized as luminous and as making a proclamation to all humanity which they “comprehend not.” All of these characteristics are consistent with Baha’u’llah’s description of the Maiden in *Gleanings* and shared in common with the eulogy of Sophia in the book of Wisdom. Following this passage, Shoghi Effendi cites words from an epistle addressed to Násiri’-d-Dín Sháh wherein Bahá’u’lláh testifies, “*This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing*” and another passage written to Shaykh Muḥammad Taqíy-i-Najafí in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* wherein Bahá’u’lláh states, “*Not of Mine own volition have I revealed Myself; but God, of His own choosing, hath manifested Me*” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 102). These passages are followed by an excerpt from another tablet, which can again be found in *Gleanings* (103):

Whenever I chose to hold My peace and be still, lo, the Voice of the Holy Spirit, standing on My right hand, aroused Me, and the Most Great Spirit appeared before My face, and Gabriel overshadowed Me, and the Spirit of Glory stirred within My bosom, bidding Me arise and break My silence. (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 102, cf. *Citadel of Faith* 100)

In this passage the Maiden is not mentioned directly, but the reference to the Most Great Spirit we can understand as indicating the Maiden, His statement that the Spirit appeared before His face suggests the presence of a personified image. Added to this account is the appearance of the angel Gabriel. Each of these accounts contains some significant differences, yet the substance of His claim remains apparent. The variations suggest that the language is a vehicle of symbolic expression and is not strictly literal, although the accounts do seem to indicate a first encounter with what Bahá’u’lláh designates the Most Great Spirit.

In one passage, Shoghi Effendi states that during the early days, when Bahá’u’lláh was secluded in the mountains of Kurdistan, He wrote prayers and soliloquies both in verse and prose, in Arabic and Persian, in which “He lauded the names and attributes of His Creator, extolled the glories and mysteries of His own Revelation” and “sang the praises of that Maiden that personified the Spirit of God within Him” (*God Passes By* 120–21).⁹ This statement further suggests a dream or vision within the consciousness of Bahá’u’lláh, but the parallel Shoghi Effendi repeatedly draws with the burning bush and dove suggests that even the dream itself may be a vehicle of expression more than a literal phenomenon.

Most clearly, the Maiden image associated with the Síyáh-Chál signifies the mediation of a Revelation of God.¹⁰ This role is central to the concept of Sophia presented in the Wisdom literature:

⁹ For additional references to the Maid of Heaven (singular) see *The Hidden Words* 49–50; *Gleanings* 91, 282; *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 251; and *The Tablet of the Holy Mariner*” (*Bahá’i Prayers* 221–29).

¹⁰ “[T]he origin and nature of wisdom as mediator of revelation are identical. . . . Hence the knowledge mediated by her has the character of direct revelation. Wisdom cannot be controlled; she must be prayed for (7:7; 9:1–18), and she comes as the *spirit of wisdom* (7:7) to those who seek her. He who knows her is himself qualified to be a

She is a *breath* of the power of God, pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; so nothing impure can find its way into her. For she is a *reflection* of the eternal light, untarnished *mirror* of God's active power, and *image* of his goodness. (Wis. 7:25–26, emphasis added)

Her very nature is described to suggest that she is herself a Revelation of God, “a breath of the power of God” indicates that she is the life-generating force, God's breath which originally breathed life into Adam in Genesis (2:7) and signifies the inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; *Synopsis* 11; *Gleanings* 15), thus identifying her with the Logos or Word of God. In the book of Ecclesiasticus she says, “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High” (Eccles. 24:1–4), “the Creator of all things instructed me” (Eccles. 24:8). It is further stated that she is “no other than the Book of the Covenant of the Most High God, the Law that Moses enjoined on us” (Eccles. 24:23). She emanates from God and reflects the eternal light. This aspect of her nature is also described as actively mediating the Revelation of God to holy souls and prophets: “she renews the world, and generation after generation, passing into holy souls, she makes them into God's friends and prophets” (Wis. 7:27).

Her role as mediator can be understood on various levels: she can be seen in all things “she pervades and permeates all things” (Wis. 7:24); she can be seen as directly imparting God's Word to “holy souls,” as is frequently illustrated in the Bible, and to Prophets as is indicated by her identification with the Law of Moses (Eccles. 24:23) and suggested by the Logos Christology of the New Testament and Bahá'u'lláh's description of the Maid of Heaven.

Once the parallels between the Maiden of Heaven and Sophia are observed, in close proximity other references to “wisdom” in Bahá'u'lláh's writings help to reinforce the view that a direct literary or theological link exists. Perhaps the strongest such instance occurs in *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih* (Words of Paradise):

Wisdom is God's emissary and the Revealer of His Name the Omniscient. Through it the loftiness of man's station is made manifest and evident. It is all-knowing and the foremost Teacher in the school of existence. It is the Guide and is invested with high distinction. Thanks to its educating influence earthly beings have become imbued with a gem-like spirit which outshineth the heavens. In the city of justice it is the unrivalled Speaker Who, in the year nine, illumined the world with the joyful tidings of this Revelation. And it was this peerless Source of wisdom that at the beginning of the foundation of the world ascended the stair of inner meaning and when enthroned upon the pulpit of utterance, through the operation of the divine Will, proclaimed two words. The first heralded the promise of reward, while the second voiced the ominous warning of punishment. (*Tablets* 66)

The references to Wisdom's being “God's emissary,” to its luminosity (“outshineth the heavens”), to its preexistence (“at the beginning of the foundation of the world”), and to its role

mediator of revelation. ‘Passing into holy souls from generation to generation, she equips them as friends of God and prophets,’ 7:27. This work of *sophia* is illustrated by a series of individual paradigms in Wis. 10” (Kittel, *Theological Dictionary* 7: 499–500).

as divine proclaimer-all suggest characteristics of Sophia as she appears in the Wisdom literature. Most relevant to the foregoing points under consideration, however, is the verse, “In the city of justice it is the unrivalled Speaker Who, in the year nine, illumined the world with the joyful tidings of this Revelation.” The “year nine” is unquestionably a reference to the year 1269 AH, nine years after the Báb’s declaration (1260 AH), a year that began during Bahá’u’lláh’s four-month imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál.¹¹ In this verse “Wisdom” is, therefore, presented as “the unrivalled Speaker” who appeared in the Síyáh-Chál. This provides very strong evidence that the Speaker (i.e., Wisdom/Sophia) is the Maiden of Heaven.

The Image of Trustworthiness

A further use of this type of symbolic expression can be seen in the Tablet of *Ishráqát* (Splendors) where Bahá’u’lláh uses feminine imagery to describe and glorify the virtue of trustworthiness. Bahá’u’lláh later quotes this imagery in the Tablet of *Tarázát* (Ornaments) and again in the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (136–37).¹² Although trustworthiness is presented as “one of the beauties of the Most Sublime Paradise,” which evokes a quranic depiction of *húris*, there are once again correlations that also suggest the image of Sophia in the book of Wisdom, in particular her radiance, her act of proclamation and her role as an instrument of well-being to those who respond to her.

Bahá’u’lláh describes the Maid of Heaven’s trustworthiness mentioning her “station” in the “estimation of God.” This suggests that the imagery is intended to convey the importance of trustworthiness. Bahá’u’lláh saw her

standing on a pillar of light,¹³ and calling aloud saying: “O inmates of earth and heaven! Behold ye My beauty, and My radiance, and My revelation, and My effulgence. By God, the True One! I am Trustworthiness and the revelation thereof, and the beauty thereof. I will recompense whosoever will cleave unto Me, and recognize My rank and station, and hold fast unto My hem. I am the, most great ornament of the people of Bahá, and the vesture of glory unto all who are in the kingdom of creation. I am the supreme instrument for the prosperity of the world, and the horizon of assurance unto all beings.” (*Tablets* 122)

Prefacing this description of trustworthiness, Bahá’u’lláh tells the recipient of the Tablet, Jalíl-i-Khu’í, to “[a]dmonish men to fear God” and says that this “fear” is “the chief, commander of the army of thy Lord. Its hosts are a praiseworthy character and goodly deeds” (*Tablets* 121). This fear and its relationship to conduct, is in the context of this feminine personification, the feature that brings to mind the Wisdom literature most clearly. This fear is the essence or root of wisdom (or *sophia*) in Proverbs (1:7), Psalms (111:10), the Book of Job (28:28), Ecclesiasticus (1:14) and Bahá’u’lláh’s own teachings (*Tablets* 155). This use of fear suggests that different virtues such as wisdom and trustworthiness can be described in the same allegorical language and that all virtues are inseparable and aspects of one and the same divine reality.

¹¹ See Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 29, 104.

¹² In the Tablet of *Tarázát*, Bahá’u’lláh writes, “Not long ago these sublime words were revealed from the Pen of the Most High” (*Tablets* 37–38), presumably referring to the Tablet of *Ishráqát*.

¹³ 13. Cf. Eccles. 24:1–4.

In one passage, Bahá'u'lláh directly addresses the question of describing wisdom and its relationship to the commandments of God:

God's consummate wisdom is far beyond any description or fitting mention. Verily, people see with their own eyes and yet deny; they are aware, yet they pretend not to know. Had they observed the ordinance of God they would have attained the good of this world and the next. (*Huqúqu'lláh* 16)

As this passage shows, wisdom cannot be described befittingly, a point that suggests one reason why the book of Wisdom's eulogy to wisdom may resort to such inspirational and allegorical language, even as Bahá'u'lláh does when speaking of trustworthiness. Another point made in this passage centers on obedience to the ordinances of God and its relationship to attaining the highest good.

In both Greek thought and Hebrew wisdom literature, we find two dominating concerns: the question of what is the greatest wisdom and how the seeker of wisdom can attain it. In Hebrew sacred literature, wisdom is viewed from the perspective of the Jewish understanding of God and the Law. *Sophia* in the Israelite Wisdom literature therefore has a specifically Jewish definition: *sophia* emanates (Wis. 7:25, Prov. 8:22) from God and is to be identified with the *Torah* or *Word* of Yahweh (Eccles. 19:20). To find or attain wisdom required obedience to the commandments and consciousness of the sovereignty and judgment of God. These prerequisites are expressed repeatedly in various proverbs contained in the Wisdom literature. The following proverb is characteristic:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [*hokmā*]; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. (Ps. 111:10, trans. *New International Version*)

And in the book of Ecclesiasticus:

Wisdom consists entirely in fearing the Lord and wisdom is entirely constituted by the fulfilling of the Law. (Eccles. 19:20)

This teaching is re-stated by Bahá'u'lláh among a series of proverbs contained in a tablet called "Words of Wisdom":

The essence of wisdom is the fear of God, the dread of His scourge and punishment, and the apprehension of His justice and decree. ("Aṣl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr" [Words of Wisdom], *Tablets* 155)

Some scholars argue that the Hebrew wisdom literature was a reaction against the cultural pressure and hegemony of Greek religious ideas.¹⁴ From this point of view, *Sophia* is seen as

¹⁴ For various attempts to find the roots of the personification of Wisdom in Hebrew writings, see, for example, Kittel, *Theological Dictionary* 7:490ff. The speculation includes Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Iranian-Chaldaean possibilities. The Iranian-Chaldaean origin focus upon the personification of piety: *armaiti* in the Avesta.

essentially a foreign mythological goddess turned into a metaphor and used to vindicate the primacy of the Word of Yahweh. This argument is probably unresolvable, but the idea that a Hebrew author would use Greek imagery to convey Hebrew teaching *does* appear to have some merit. Even if the original aims of the author cannot be proved, parallels do exist, and the strong influence and presence of Hellenistic culture within the Hebrew environment cannot be denied.

St. Paul offers a less disputable connection. Directly confronting the Greek preference for wisdom over the God of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, St. Paul states that Jesus Christ is the *sophia* of God:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate" [Isa. 29: 14]. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom [*sophia*] of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (1 Cor. 1:18–25 trans. *New International Version*, cf. Qur'an43:63)

In this passage Christ is presented as the personification of Wisdom in a way that is directly confronting Greek ideology.

Personification and Logos

All of the characteristics found in these parallels suggest that Wisdom (i.e., Sophia) and the Maiden are essentially one reality—the eternal Logos, Word, Holy Spirit, or Spirit of God working

"Wisdom is from the gods, and to the gods is she precious; for ever her kingdom is fixed in heaven, for the lord of the holy ones (i.e., the gods of heaven) hath raised her" (Albright qtd. in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary* 7:490). Scholars have also noted a corollary between the book of Enoch and the image of Sophia: "Wisdom found no place where she might dwell; then a dwelling-place was assigned her in the heavens. Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the children of men, and found no dwelling-place: Wisdom returned to her place and took her seat among the angels. And unrighteousness went forth from her chambers: Whom she sought not she found, and dwelt with them, as rain in a desert, and dew on a thirsty land" (Eth. Enoch 42: 1–3). Another translation of the last verse is, "When iniquity burst its bounds, she found those who did not seek her" (see Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*). In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "In the night-season the beauty of the immortal Being hath repaired from the emerald height of fidelity unto the Sadratu'l-Muntahá, and wept with such a weeping that the concourse on high and the dwellers of the realms above wailed at His lamenting. Whereupon there was asked, Why the wailing and weeping? He made reply: As bidden I waited expectant upon the hill of faithfulness, yet inhaled not from them that dwell on earth the fragrance of fidelity. Then summoned to return I beheld, and lo! certain doves of holiness were sore tried within the claws of the dogs of earth. Thereupon the Maid of heaven hastened forth unveiled and resplendent from Her mystic mansion, and asked of their names, and all were told but one. And when urged, the first letter thereof was uttered, whereupon the dwellers of the celestial chambers rushed forth out of their habitation of glory" (49).

in history. These characteristics are common to all Manifestations, as explained in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* although past scriptures use other symbols and do not always make such strong or direct use of personification. Shoghi Effendi, for example, points out that the Spirit of God, or Most Great Spirit is “that *same* Spirit which, in the Zoroastrian, the Mosaic, the Christian, and Muḥammadan Dispensations, had been respectively symbolized by the ‘Sacred Fire’, the ‘Burning Bush’, the ‘Dove’, and the ‘Angel Gabriel’” (*Citadel of Faith* 100, emphasis added). Apart from the masculine image of the Angel Gabriel,¹⁵ most of the metaphors employed are not personifications. In the case of Christ, the dove is used, perhaps to suggest the gentle and peaceful nature of Jesus’ teachings. However, what the dove shares in common with the Maid of Heaven is that both represent a point in historical time when the Most Great Spirit is said, so to speak, to descend into the presence of the Manifestation. Otherwise, the Most Great Spirit does not in itself have time-based limitations, since it is the Spirit of God.

When we move from the theophany of John 1 :32 concerning the dove, we find that in the Christology of the Gospel of St. John and the Epistles of St. Paul the idea of personification is developed. In the prologue to the Gospel of St. John, the Logos or Word parallels Sophia and the Maiden in that it is personified (i.e., in this instance, in the person of Christ; John 1:1, 14, 1 Cor. 1:24), a preexistent eternal reality (John 1:1), the source of life to humankind (John 1:4–5, 9), a radiant light (John 1:4–5, 9), and a reality unrecognized by the world (John 1:9). The Logos and Sophia are also parallel in that both are said to be involved in the act of creation (John 1 :3, Prov. 8:22ff., Ps. 33:6).¹⁶

The Maiden as Celestial Bride

Another parallel between the Wisdom literature and Bahá’u’lláh’s metaphor of the Maiden is the symbolism of the bride and bridegroom. In one sense, this symbolism is not remote from the quranic imagery of the *húris* and the promise of celestial brides for the faithful believers. However, a more messianic corollary appears in the Wisdom literature. Both the Song of Solomon and the book of Wisdom are attributed to King Solomon. The Song of Solomon extols and dwells upon the bliss of love between the lover and the beloved. In the book of the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom, or Sophia, appears as the beloved sought after by Solomon. In one sense, the great King Solomon can be viewed as corresponding to Bahá’u’lláh, and Sophia as the Maiden or heavenly Bride.

Conclusion

¹⁵ The appearance of an angel is common to biblical theophanies: “The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush” (Exod. 3:2). See also Abraham (Gen. 22:11–12), Jacob (Gen. 32:26–32). Ṭabarí records that Ibn ‘Abbas said that Muḥammad said, “My supporter is Gabriel, and God has never sent any prophet whose supporter he was not” (Ṭabarí, *Commentary* 464). Justin Martyr (AD 110–165) identifies the angel that appeared in the Bush on Sinai with Christ (the Logos): “God begat before all creatures a Beginning [who was] a certain rational power [proceeding] from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lore!, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos. . . . For He can be called by all those names, since He ministers to the Father’s will, and since He was begotten of the Father by an act of the will” (“Dialogue with Trypho,” Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:227).

¹⁶ Ps. 33:6, “By the word [Logos LXX] of the Lord were the heavens made, and their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”

In concluding, it should be noted that similar parallels with Sophia in Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Shiite, and Shaykhí religious writings have been noticed by Edward Conze, Henry Corbin, and other religious scholars. To explore fully this subject is outside the scope of this paper and beyond the field of this writer's research. Nevertheless, the following two brief excerpts are sufficient to suggest that there does appear to be a consistent development and pervasive use of feminine imagery to communicate divine wisdom, spirituality, and creativity.

With regard to parallels with Buddhism, Edward Conze writes:

I may well be said to be stretching a point by introducing some "Wisdom Books" of the Old Testament. But they obviously belong to the same religious complex, and were the work of the immediate predecessors of the Gnostics as well as a source of inspiration to many of them. It seems to me remarkable that during the same period of time—i.e. from ca. 200 B.C. onwards—two distinct civilizations, one in the Mediterranean, the other in India, should have constructed a closely analogous set of ideas concerning "Wisdom", each one apparently independently, from its own cultural antecedents. Here are some of the similarities between Chochma and Sophia on the one side and the Prajñáparmitá on the other: Both are feminine, and called "mothers" and "nurses." They are equated with the Law (*tórá* and *Dharma*), have existed from all times, are the equivalent of God or the Buddha, the consort of Jahve or Vajradhara, extremely elusive, respectively a gift of God or due to the Buddha's might, dispense the waters of knowledge and the food of life, are extremely pure, related to the sky or ether, connected with trees and compared to light. . . . (*Further Buddhist Studies* 20–21)

Similarly, in a recently translated book by the late Islamicist Henry Corbin, there are scattered references to the existence of feminine personifications in the religious history of Iran (Zoroastrian, Shiite, and Shaykhí), which Corbin characterized as a "sophiology." For example, Corbin writes:

Both in Mazdaism and in Suhrawardi's theosophy there are Angels of the Earth, Spenta Armaiti and Daena, Figures respectively representing the eternal Sophia; in Shi'ite gnosis we find Fatima, person of Light, Daughter of the Prophet, who is also a Figure representing Sophia and the supracelestial Earth. (*Spiritual Body* xiv, *cf.* 36ff.)

The Zoroastrian or Mazdean feminine personifications in ancient Persia noted by Henry Corbin, as well as perhaps some influences from Hindu religious imagery, may well be the root of the similar personifications found in the distinct and geographically separate religions of Judaism and Buddhism. The Jews were captives in ancient Persia, and Buddhism later spread to Western Persia. This, of course, necessitates the generally accepted late-date hypothesis for the Wisdom literature in both traditions. Whether or not there is a plausible literary-historical link, the theological link remains apparent. The parallels between Zoroastrian and Buddhist personifications, (whatever the course of their exact scriptural development), and the descriptions of the Old Testament Sophia and the Logos Christology of the New Testament are all general, like their parallel to the image of the Maid of Heaven in Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

Nevertheless, within their own canonical literature, Christian commentators have argued that there is an intended connection between such parallels.¹⁷ The same may be true in the case of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Bahá'u'lláh frequently draws on the language and symbolism in biblical narratives, quranic verses, and Sufi poetry for inspirational and didactic purposes. Such instances occur often without any citations, and it seems that the reader is expected to already know the stories, or it is assumed that in time they will.¹⁸ The connection between the biblical image of Sophia and Bahá'u'lláh's symbolism of the Maiden may express the eternal Logos dimension of his Revelation and involve an affirmation of fulfilment related to a possible eschatological interpretation of the Wisdom literature. Also, the feminine aspect of the symbolism undoubtedly has significance in and of itself with regard to our whole understanding of both Revelation and the importance of the feminine in the Bahá'í Faith.

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¹⁷ “In attempting to do justice to the uniqueness of Christ, St. Paul affirms the closest possible relation between Christ and the Father, involving pre-existence and participation in the creation of the universe; cosmology as well as soteriology was Christ's proper work. The late Hebrew conception of wisdom seemed to offer an exact parallel, and the exegesis of Col. 1 is impossible without reference to Prov. 8. This Pauline thought is parallel to the Johannine thought of Christ and the Logos or Word of God, and Col. 1 should be studied in the light of John 1.1–18. These two passages are the highest peaks of Christological speculation in the NT [New Testament]. Their witness is that physics as well as theology needs Christ as its interpretative principle. The Redeemer is none other than the Creator of the universe” (E. C. Blackman in Richardson, *Theological Word Book of the Bible* 283). This correlation can be observed in the earliest writings of the Church Fathers. See, for example, Justin Martyr: “Dialogue with Trypho,” Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 :227, 228. In Origen's *De Principiis*: “We have first to ascertain what the only begotten Son of God is, seeing He is called by many different names, according to the circumstances and views of individuals. For He is termed Wisdom, according to the expression of Solomon: ‘The Lord created me—the beginning of His ways, and among His works, before He made any other thing; He founded me before the ages. In the beginning, before He formed the earth . . . He brought me forth’ [Prov. 8:22–25]. He is also styled First-born, as the apostle has declared: ‘who is the first-born of every creature’ [Col. 1:15]. The first-born, however, is not by nature a different person from Wisdom, but one and the same. Finally, the Apostle Paul says that ‘Christ (is) the power and wisdom of God’” [1 Cor. 1:24]. See Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 4:246. Origen also says, “We must understand her [i.e., sophia] to be the Word of God” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 4:246). See also Tertullian: “Against Praxeas,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3:614.

¹⁸ 18. See Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 7: “to this testify the records of the best-known books. These you must certainly have perused; if not, undoubtedly you will.”

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