

THE SYRIAN PROPHET(S)

Enoch N. Tanyi

The Qur'án declares that before Muḥammad there were Messengers of God whose names have not been mentioned (40:78). But can an idea of where some of them came from and where they fit into the chronology of the known Messengers be had? The aim of this research note is to answer these two questions, namely: (i) to locate the place of each Messenger in the overall chronology of the known Messengers, and (ii) to determine the nationalities of some unnamed Messengers.

Discussion

The Messengers before Muḥammad are listed chronologically as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (The Báb, *Selections* 126). The Qur'án inserts Hud and Salih between Noah and Abraham, and Lot and Shu'aib between Abraham and Moses (7:65–103). The Messenger Krishna is placed between Abraham and Moses (*The Bahá'í Faith* 1), but whether Krishna comes before Lot and Shu'aib or after Shu'aib is not relevant to this essay. Zoroaster and Buddha are placed between Moses and Christ (*The Bahá'í Faith* 1).

Thus, a more comprehensive, yet incomplete, chronology of the Messengers becomes: Adam, Noah, Hud, Salih, Abraham, Lot, Krishna, Shu'aib, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh. This list does not include Messengers that came before Adam. Having prepared the chronological order of the Messengers, the next step is to ask: What clue is there to any unnamed Messenger?

Bahá'u'lláh writes of the different languages that have been known to humankind since Adam's language. The land of Babel is mentioned as the place where diversities of language arose. Out of the resulting languages, Syriac became prominent and the language of revelation or of the sacred scriptures. Syriac maintained this important role until Hebrew became the language of revelation for Abraham (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 173).

The Qur'án asserts that "We sent not an apostle Except [to teach] in the language of his [own] people" (14:4). This quotation means that any Apostle or Messenger sent from God teaches in his mother-tongue, a fact proven by religious history.

It can therefore be inferred that since the sacred scriptures at some time were revealed in Syriac, then Syriac was the mother-tongue of this Messenger. But Syriac is the language of ancient Syria (*Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*). Therefore, this Messenger was Syrian. (There could have been more than one Messenger.) In the Qur'án, God states that Messengers had been sent to the nations before Muḥammad (16:63). This statement would have made it less necessary to try to show that a Messenger or Messengers appeared in Syria or any other nation, but for the fact that the Arabic word translated as "nation" can also mean something else that seems like a better translation. The Arabic word is *Ummat* and can also be translated as "religious community." This is a better translation since nations in the geographical sense have had their boundaries shifted back and forth with time. Some nations have completely lost their identities and been absorbed into larger ones, and some new ones have been created.

A study of history would suffice to demonstrate these points, but reference to Bahá'í literature would present one example. Some letters from 'Abdu'l-Bahá published in *Star of the West* are addressed as "Haifa, Syria." Today, Haifa is in Israel.

The next step is to try to locate the position of this Messenger in the prepared chronology. Since the Babel episode took place between the times of Noah and Abraham (Genesis 9:29–12:1), it can be stated that this Syrian Messenger arose between the times of Noah and Abraham. It has already been shown that Hud and Salih also came between Noah and Abraham. So, the questions that naturally arise are: Was either of these two Messengers a Syrian, or were both Syrians? Let us examine these two questions one after the other, starting with Hud.

Hud was sent to the people of 'Ad who were also his people (7:65). "The story of the 'Ad people," according to a commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, "belongs to Arabian tradition. . . . They occupied a large tract of country in southern Arabia, extending from 'Umman at the mouth of the southern end of the Red Sea" (Yusuf Ali, *Koran* 358). This extract shows that Hud was an Arab, not a Syrian.

Next comes the turn of Salih. "Salih was sent to his own people, the people of Thamud" (7:73). "The Thamud people were the successors to the culture and civilization of the 'Ad people. . . . Their seat was in the north-western corner of Arabia (Arabian Petraea), between Medina and Syria" (Yusuf Ali, *Koran* 360). This excerpt shows that Salih was an Arab, not a Syrian, because Salih was from the Thamud people who "were the successors to the culture and civilization of the 'Ad people." The 'Ad people belonged to the Arabian tradition, and so the Thamud people also belonged to the Arabian tradition and were Arabs.

Conclusion

A Syrian Messenger or Syrian Messengers did appear in this world between the times of Noah and Abraham. The name of this Syrian Messenger is (or their names are) unknown. The order in which the Syrian Messenger(s) appeared in relation to Hud and Salih cannot be shown.

Works Cited

- The Báb. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*. Comp. Research Department. Trans. H. Taherzadeh et al. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976.
- Bahá'í Faith, The*. Hidáyatu'lláh Ahmadiyyih. Thornhill, Ontario: Bahá'í Canada Publications, n.d.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- Bible, The Holy*. Authorized King James version. Red Letter edition. Miami, Florida: P.S.I. and Associates, 1986.
- Koran, The Holy*. Trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali. 3d ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al Arabia, 1938.
- Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*. Ed. J. Coulson et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.