

Immanence and Transcendence in Theophanic Symbolism

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Abstract

Various anthropomorphic and naturalistic symbols are used in biblical, quranic, and Bahá'í scriptures to depict theophanies—the appearance of God and the divine in the realm of creation. Many of the same theophanic symbols that appear in biblical and quranic scriptures are used in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh to communicate Bahá'u'lláh's own divinity and to connect his ministry with past redemptive history. Such symbols include an “angel,” “fire,” and the prophets' claims to be God incarnate, symbolically the “face” or “voice” of God. This article examines the theological significance of some of these symbols, giving special emphasis to how they are used by Bahá'u'lláh to convey the immanence or transcendence of God and to create continuity between his own revelation and past revelations.

To understand the symbols used by Bahá'u'lláh in his writings better, it seems appropriate first to consider their origin and the possible reasons why Bahá'u'lláh has chosen to adopt them. As will be shown, all the principal symbols considered in this article have biblical antecedents. It is possible to view the appearance of such symbols in Bahá'u'lláh's writings as literary borrowings” or as a way of affirming and continuing an existing scriptural heritage.

As a literary phenomenon, such borrowing is not unique to Bahá'í scripture, and the reasons for its occurrence vary. Among the reasons for this phenomenon, it appears, for example, that some narrative forms are borrowed and reshaped so as to modify¹ their previous ideological content. Bahá'u'lláh's use of 'Aṭṭár's “seven valleys” may be such an example.² In other cases, symbols and narratives are borrowed or reshaped as a means of re-affirming a previous religious tradition and establishing a continuity in a long process of redemptive history. This appears to be the case with regard to biblical narratives and symbols.

Evidence of symbols and narrative forms being either borrowed or forming part of a common continuing literary heritage can be observed in the development of biblical scripture. Since the publication of Babylonian creation and flood myths in the 1870s, it has become generally accepted among academics that the various narratives in Genesis are not wholly “original” literary works.³ Some scholars argued that the narrative forms and some key symbols appeared to be based on earlier mythological accounts that existed among the civilizations with which Israel interacted. This new awareness of Israel's early religious context led to different responses. Having attributed uniqueness to the Genesis narrative in ways where uniqueness no longer seemed to apply, these new findings created a crisis of faith for some Christians. A few scholars argued that the evidence

¹ If, for example, the intention is to transform a popular polytheist narrative into a monotheistic version, then such modification could be seen, from the monotheistic point of view, as a correction.

² 'Aṭṭár, Faríd ud-Díin (d. circa A.D. 1229) was a Persian mystic of Nays̄habúr and author of the *Manteq at-Tair* (The Conference of the Birds) a portion of which consists of a journey through seven valleys.

³ See Bernhard W. Anderson, *Living World* 36.

meant the Genesis narratives were not divinely revealed.⁴ With the passage of time, however, it has become generally recognized that the parallels between, for example, the Israelite and Babylonian flood accounts tend to pertain to the narrative form and a few symbols, whereas the distinctive differences tend to be substantive theological issues—an awareness that has mitigated the shock of the initial discoveries. It is safe to say that Genesis is no mere copy or composite of earlier mythologies; it may use similar narrative forms and some symbols similar to those in other mythologies, but it does not imitate the message of the other sources. The question of the inspiration of Genesis, therefore, must be examined from the point of view of the distinctive way in which it retells the earlier mythological⁵ material and should not depend upon its possible use of earlier sources.

If Israelite symbolism and stories were, in some instances, based on similar mythological forms found in the surrounding cultures, then a new form and life given to these stories would have been all the more apparent when retold and reshaped in a way that concerned the needs and life of the Israelite nation.⁶ The greater the familiarity with a story, the more any change in it will be noticeable and forceful. If a story is seen as possessing a sense of authority and sacredness, it is possible that by using the similar elements and symbols, the sense of authority and sacredness can be carried over while at the same time giving it a new meaning.⁷ Having heard and known these stories, succeeding generations could detect how their own traditions agreed and differed from others. It was only in much later centuries that this original mythological and cultural context was lost because of the consequences of time, only to be gradually rediscovered as the necessary scholarship evolved and began the difficult process of retrieving it.

The study of biblical texts is hampered by their antiquity,⁸ but, the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith presents an opportunity to examine a relatively contemporary example of what may

⁴ The arguments soon carried over to other Old Testament books beyond the Pentateuch. Friedrich Delitzsch, for example, not only challenged the orthodox view of the Pentateuch but went on to write, “Revelation indeed! a greater mistake on the part of the human mind can hardly be conceived than this, that for long centuries the priceless remains of the old Hebrew literature collected in the Old Testament were regarded collectively as a religious canon, a revealed book of religion, in spite of the fact that it contains such literature as the Book of Job, which, with words that in places border on blasphemy, cast doubt on the very existence of a just God, together with absolutely secular productions, such as the wedding songs (the so-called Song of Solomon)” (*Babel and Bible* 176). Delitzsch’s respected position in Old Testament studies made his views seem especially disturbing to the traditionalists. For the predictable orthodox response, see E.L. Bevir, *Bible or Babylon?* See also, Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* 126ff.

⁵ There are a number of ways the terms “myth” and “mythological” can be defined. Here it is used to mean any account that seeks to explain humankind’s relationship to divinity and the cosmos, whether from a polytheistic or monotheistic point of view. Defined in this way, both Genesis and Bahá'í scripture have an important mythological dimension.

⁶ It has been theorized that some similarities may even be the result of a “protest against foreign ideas,” which is not to say, because they are foreign, but because they are foreign ideas that are believed to have, or are associated with, an inferior moral vision. See Helmer Ringgren, “Impact of the Ancient Near East” 42.

⁷ The phenomenon of retelling and reshaping popular sacred narratives is not unique to Western religious traditions. For a recent analysis of this occurrence in the East, see Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas*.

⁸ Establishing clear connections between the Hebrew scriptures and Babylonian texts is difficult and problematic. See Helmer Ringgren “Impact of the Ancient Near East” 42. Nevertheless, the following two brief examples—one of a symbol and one of a narrative form—provide reasonably definite connections between the Bible and Babylonian mythology: An example of borrowed symbolism is the sea monsters Leviathan and Rahab, mention of which can be found in the books of Isaiah, Job, and Psalms (e.g., Isa. 27:1, 30:7, 51:9). With reference to Leviathan, Ringgren writes, “In Isa. 27:1 Leviathan is referred to as ‘the twisting serpent, the writhing serpent’ and ‘the dragon’ . . . Now Ugaritic Lotan—which is the same word as *liwyátán*—has exactly the same epithets. We have to conclude from this that the prophet has used a piece of Canaanite mythology and adapted it for his purposes. What we do not know, however, is whether this was still living mythology at the time of the prophet or had simply gone into common language as a figure of speech, which was found suitable to denote the powers of evil” (“Impact of the Ancient Near

be similar processes in the formation of scripture. Whereas the development of the narrative form and symbolism of Genesis is surrounded by uncertainty, the original literary context of the narrative form of Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys* (*Haft-Vádí*), like his use of biblical symbolism, is clearly evident. It is inconceivable, for example, that Shaykh Muhyi'd-Dín⁹ and other Muslim mystics would not have immediately recognized that Bahá'u'lláh was expressing himself through a reshaping of 'Aṭṭár's seven valleys,¹⁰ as found in the *Manteq at-Tair* (Conference of the Birds).¹¹ Similarly, whereas the Genesis flood narratives may be a corrective¹² reshaping of the Babylonian version of the flood,¹³ Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys* is, for example, a recognizable theological reshaping of 'Aṭṭár's seven valleys. What is important here—as with the Genesis flood account—is not the originality of the literary form, but the new meaning given to the previous account.¹⁴

Whatever the similarities between Babylonian and Hebrew versions of the creation and flood myths, the Genesis versions are retold in a distinctively dualistic and monotheistic form. Similarly, whereas 'Aṭṭár's seven valleys has been interpreted as a type of monist theology by

East" 34). Commenting on the same symbols, Stephen Bigger writes, "As poetry, the myths provide images to demonstrate God's greatness, as he overpowers the most powerful creatures that the world can offer. Political implications are drawn, comparing the great powers to these dragons, which were developed further in later 'apocalyptic' literature (e.g., Daniel)" (*Creating the Old Testament* 76). With reference to the use of a Babylonian narrative form in Genesis, see D. Winton Thomas, ed. *Documents from the Old Testament* 17ff.

⁹ Shaykh Muhyi'd-Dín was the recipient of Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys*. Based on the internal evidence of the text, it appears that they maintained a cordial relationship, if not close friendship, and that Bahá'u'lláh regarded him as "well-grounded in mystic truth" (*Seven Valleys* 54).

¹⁰ This fact is evident from Bahá'u'lláh's own words that "some have called these [stages] Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities" (*Seven Valleys* 16).

¹¹ See *Conference of the Birds*, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, pp. 166ff. The idea of mystic pilgrimage is, of course, not original with 'Aṭṭár. Since ancient times the cosmos was thought to be constructed of seven spheres or plains through which one could ascend to God. This was further reflected in the idea of grades or stations through which a soul might pass. The Enoch tradition is one such type of journey through the worlds of God that included various "seven" motifs. See, for example, 1 and 3 Enoch (1 Enoch: seven mountains and seven rivers, chap. 77; 3 Enoch: seven heavens, chap. 18; see Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1:56, 270–71). Also, in a text known as "The Questions of Ezra," an angel explains the "seven steps to the Divinity" (Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1:597). For St. Augustine's

contribution to this mystical tradition, see Petry, *Late Medieval Mysticism* 28–29. The pilgrimage symbolism, is one of three recurrent systems of mystical imagery, the other two being alchemy and human bonding, as in courting, marriage, or friendship (see, for example, Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* 125ff.). All three forms appear in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh (for an example of alchemy see *Kitáb-i-Íqan* 158; for marriage see *Kitáb-i-Íqan* 140). It is interesting to note that whereas the individual seeker traverses a series of stages (signified by valleys) in *The Seven Valleys*, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqan* the seeker journeys to one City of God (*Kitáb-i-Íqan* 197–200). In *The Seven Valleys* the symbolism is constructed around stages of development as they may be experienced by a seeker, whereas in the *Kitáb-i-Íqan* there is an additional millennial character involving successive ages ("cities") through which humankind as a whole must pass.

¹² "Corrective" is used here in the context of monotheistic aims.

¹³ The Babylonian flood account is regarded as an incorporation into the Gilgamesh tradition.

¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh writes, "All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice" (*Hidden Words* 19–20). This passage suggests that revelation must be expressed in cultural and linguistic forms that are understandable. Nevertheless, whereas the form may have precedents, it is given a new life—a point Bahá'u'lláh may be referring to in the *Lawḥ-i-Dunyá* (Tablet to the World): "Through the movement of Our Pen of glory We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency" (*Tablets* 84).

some Sufis, Bahá'u'lláh retells the wayfarer's journey through essentially the same seven valleys¹⁵ from a dualistic point of view. Bahá'u'lláh's cosmology is consistent with biblical and quranic dualistic theism,¹⁶ and it may be that he wished to restate 'Aṭṭár's seven valleys in the same light to help conform popular mystical thought with this theological perspective.¹⁷

In addition to story forms being retold and reshaped for what can be regarded as “corrective” purposes, in scriptural cases (biblical, quranic, and Bahá'í), it is possible to observe symbols and stories being carried over from the past into new scriptures with their previous meaning(s) being affirmed or supplemented. Jesus, for example, uses the narrative of Noah to make an eschatological point (Matt. 24:37). Bahá'u'lláh also uses symbols from the Genesis account, many in much the same way as they appear in the original,¹⁸ such as God's formation of humans from clay;¹⁹ while in other cases, such as the narrative of Joseph, Bahá'u'lláh adds to it a prophetic typological²⁰ meaning relevant to his own ministry.²¹ In some cases, Bahá'u'lláh's use of biblical symbolism is not based directly on biblical texts but reflects its transmission through the Qur'án or Muslim traditions and folklore. With the above points in mind, it seems reasonable to conclude that these types of “borrowings” or active continuations of past literary elements are not fortuitous phenomena nor signs of creative weakness, but rather, a deliberate literary device occurring for important reasons that should be recognized and appreciated.

¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh follows 'Aṭṭár's structure insofar as he uses the same metaphorical valleys. The order of two valleys is switched, i.e., 'Aṭṭár: (1) Search, (2) Love, (3) Knowledge, (4) Contentment, (5) Unity, (6) Wonderment, (7) Poverty; Bahá'u'lláh: (1) Search, (2) Love, (3) Knowledge, (4) Unity, (5) Contentment, (6) Wonderment, (7) Poverty. However, this does not appear to have a bearing on the overall monist-dualist differences that exist between 'Aṭṭár's work and Bahá'u'lláh's.

¹⁶ The term “dualist theism” is used here to refer to the separation between God and creation indicative of biblical, quranic, and Bahá'í symbolism. The purpose here is not to insist that this is either wholly or in part ontological or simply ethical, but rather to point out that the symbolism is itself indicative of dualist theism, i.e., a god that is active in historical time (theism), but separate from creation (dualism= two separate categories or types of existence: God and creation). For example, if we say the “sky” symbolizes “heaven,” this type of symbolism in its literal sense indicates that heaven is “above” us, even though the ontological reality may be that heaven is not bound by any limitations of space. Similarly, Bahá'í symbolism is itself essentially “dualistic” and “theistic,” but the ontological reality is a separate issue.

¹⁷ 'Aṭṭár's message is not necessarily monist in a pantheistic sense, rather this is one way of interpreting 'Aṭṭár. 'Aṭṭár's monism can be understood in a similar light as the ethical monism found in Bahá'u'lláh's words, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting” (*Hidden Words* 7). From this perspective, 'Aṭṭár's seven valleys need not be seen as conflicting with Bahá'u'lláh's. Bahá'u'lláh is probably pointing away from the monist *interpretation* of 'Aṭṭár.

¹⁸ This is not to argue that we can know with certainty what the Genesis account intended when it was composed in the literary form with which we are now familiar. Its antiquity limits us to speculative interpretations. From a Bahá'í point of view, what is perhaps most important is understanding what role and meaning the various components of Genesis take on in Bahá'u'lláh's cosmology.

¹⁹ Cf. *Hidden Words* 32, 3; Genesis 2:7; Qur'an 15:28–29.

²⁰ “Typology” (from the Greek: *typos*) is a Christian exegetical term used to refer to a method of interpretation. The term is Christian, but the method is common to many religious traditions. Certain past events are understood as types, i.e., patterns or models which by divine design are seen as prophetically foreshadowing greater things to come, or yet to be revealed. Its New Testament basis is St. Paul's statement that “Adam . . . is a type of Him [Jesus] who was to come” (Rom. 5:14, New King James Version).

²¹ See *Gleanings* 208; cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 23, 121, 246. This typology is common to Sufi mystical literature (e.g., 'Aṭṭár, *Conference of the Birds* 31, 50, 58, 59, 104, 132–33, 138–39, 142; ; also note in Bahá'u'lláh's own *Seven Valleys* 17–18, 19, 20), but in Bahá'u'lláh's case the allegorical is complemented by the striking historical parallels, most notably between the actions of Joseph's brothers and Mírzá Yaḥyá, and Joseph's and Bahá'u'lláh's later triumph.

Trying to understand a text based on its original context is an exegetical approach supported by Bahá'u'lláh's own and most important interpretive treatise, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Book of Certitude). To explain, for example, the meaning of Jesus' prophetic reference to "the sign of the Son of Man" that will "appear in heaven" (Matt. 24:30), Bahá'u'lláh traces the use of messianic celestial "signs" as recorded in scripture and folklore (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* n 61ff.).²² In this way he demonstrates that the symbolism in Jesus' discourse belongs to a tradition and that it can be better understood when viewed in this context. Particularly significant with regard to Bahá'u'lláh's explanation of Matthew 24:30 and the discoveries of the Gilgamesh Epic, is the role extracanonical information can play in the exposition of scripture (i.e., he draws upon traditions and not just those texts that are considered canonical).

The discovery in the nineteenth century of the earlier mythological context of the Genesis material has brought a new clarity to what was actually original and most important in ancient Israelite religion and self-definition. In the same way, appreciating the context from which Bahá'u'lláh takes the symbols he uses can shed light on the purpose for which he uses them and on the ancient meanings he wishes to affirm or the special significance he may wish to give these symbols for the age in which we are now living.

Theophanic Symbolism

The variety and possible origins of symbolism in Bahá'í scripture are too vast to be treated here. The aim of this study is, therefore, to explore briefly the past occurrence of a few theophanic symbols that appear in Bahá'í scripture and to explore their theological significance. By "theophanic symbolism" is meant those symbols used to describe or communicate (1) the appearance of God to Bahá'u'lláh and (2) the appearance of God through Bahá'u'lláh to the world.²³ The appearance of God to Bahá'u'lláh can, in most cases, be described more as a communication than as an appearance. That is, in this type of scriptural theophany, the appearance of God is really a communication of God's will and purpose, which are expressed by the use of symbolic intermediaries. These intermediaries are typically anthropomorphic,²⁴ such as an angel or a celestial maiden. Such intermediaries communicate the revelation of God, not directly to humankind, but to the person of Bahá'u'lláh. As will be examined later, the symbolic intermediary with perhaps the greatest prominence in Bahá'u'lláh's writings is the "Maid of Heaven."

To communicate the appearance of God to the world, the anthropomorphic and theophanic symbol used is the person of Bahá'u'lláh (see, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 43, 53, 143, 239–

²² The extrabiblical elements in Bahá'u'lláh's accounts of Abraham and Moses can be found in ancient Jewish folklore (e.g., Joseph Gaer, *Lore of the Old Testament* 85) and traced through Islamic texts (e.g., Charles D. Matthews, *Palestine: Mohammedan Holy Land* 48–49). See also, Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vols. 1 & 5.

²³ In pantheistic cosmologies, such as the "goddess myth," all creation is seen as theophanic (from *theos* = god, and *phainesthai* = to appear), and there is some support for such a type of theophanic vision in Bahá'í scripture: "within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100, see also *Seven Valleys* 37; *Hidden Words* 6–7). However, Bahá'í theology is fundamentally dualist in its emphasis on revealed truth: the revelations of Goel to Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and the other prophets are presented as a unique, essential, and supreme type of theophany (cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 97, 112) by which the transcendent Godhead communicates the divine will to humankind. The theophanic symbolism examined in this article pertains specifically to the revelation of God to, and through, special human intermediaries, and in particular, Bahá'u'lláh. For additional information see Juan R. Cole's, "The Concept of Manifestation."

²⁴ The term "anthropomorphic" is from the Greek *anthropos*, meaning man or human, and the Greek word *morphe*, meaning form. The term "anthropomorphism" is often used to mean the attribution of human shape or characteristics to gods, animals, and objects.

40, 247).²⁵ In this form, the voice of Bahá'u'lláh becomes the voice of God, the face of Bahá'u'lláh becomes the face of God, and so on (see, for example, Bahá'u'lláh *Epistle* 48, *Gleanings* 44).²⁶ It is especially important to understand what this type of theophanic symbolism points to and not to mistake it for an ontological reality. Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be God and the Maid of Heaven are the two most pervasive theophanic symbols in his writings and, for the most part, represent two distinctive types.²⁷

Examples of Theophanic Symbols

For the purpose of this study, the symbols considered can be mainly characterized as anthropomorphic and naturalistic. The anthropomorphic symbols use some form of human representation; whereas the naturalistic symbols use imagery from nature. These two types of symbolic forms can be divided into two theological types: the immanent and the transcendent. These types will be further examined. The following survey is intended to provide some initial context for the subsequent analysis of these symbols in Bahá'í scripture.

Symbols and modes of expression that attribute human characteristics to God are, generally speaking, easily identified as anthropomorphic. In some instances—most notably in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament, the Qur'an, and Bahá'í scripture—theophanies are presented in stark anthropomorphic language. God is, for example, said to walk about in the Garden where Adam and Eve reside (Gen. 3:8) and to have closed the door of the Ark behind Noah (Gen. 7:16). Form is attributed to God (Num. 11:25), including in the sense of having an “arm” (Ps. 89:13; Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 62, 169; *Proclamation* 90); an “ear” (Ps. 34:15; Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 29); an “eye” (2 Chron. 16:9; Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 228, 267; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 16, 196; *Seven Valleys* 29); hands (Isa. 1:15; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 136) or hand (Qur'an 39:67, 68:10; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 90, 136); a mouth (Ps. 33:6; Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 141, 142, 246; *Prayers and Meditations* 133, 163; *Tablets* 162); a voice (Ezek. 1:24, 28; Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 57, 60, 145; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 215); a “face” (Num. 6:25, Qur'an 2:12, 2:272, 6:52, 13:22, 18:28, 28:88, 30:39, 60:27; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 4, 19, 142; *Epistle* 48, 113); and even “wings” (Pss. 36:7, 57: 1).

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi points out that Bahá'u'lláh has “in unnumbered passages claimed His utterance to be the ‘Voice of Divinity, the Call of God Himself’” (*The World Order* 113).

²⁶ The nature of such statements can be better understood in the broader context of Bahá'u'lláh's writings explaining his own claims by comparison to similar statements pertaining to, or by, the recognized Imams of *Shí'ih* Islam (see, *Epistle* 111–13). It is also helpful to compare Bahá'u'lláh's claims with his statements about Jesus (see *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 4, 19).

²⁷ The assertion that Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be God and the Maid of Heaven (the two most pervasive theophanic symbols in his writings) is not based on a scientific analysis, but rather on the simple fact that Bahá'u'lláh presents himself as the voice of God in innumerable passages, especially in his later works. Based on the widely available and translated text of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, it is clear that he uses theophanic symbols such as the “Dove,” the “Pen of the Most High,” the angel “Gabriel,” various solar related symbols such as “Dawning-place” and “Dayspring,” and so on, but the claim to be God—and specifically, to speak with the voice of God—is both explicit and implicit in a larger number of passages in his writings. In the *Hidden Words*, for example, Bahá'u'lláh speaks typically as God in the first person, “I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee” (*Hidden Words* 4) rather than, “God knew His love for thee.” From such writings it can be argued that Bahá'u'lláh is in effect presenting himself as a theophanic symbol. This type of presentation is characteristic of passages in many different texts by Bahá'u'lláh, but by comparison, references to, for example, the Dove or Gabriel, are infrequent. With regard to the Maid of Heaven, Bahá'u'lláh wrote a number of tablets (*Lawḥ-i-Ru'yá*, *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*, *Súratu'l-Haykal*) which give central emphasis to the Maiden in connection with the birth of his revelation (see Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 101, 118, 221). No comparable tablets give the same emphasis to other theophanic symbols.

These forms are also said to be active in the world. For example, there are references to God's breathing (Gen. 2:7, Ps. 33:6; Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 247, *Prayers and Meditations* 52, *Seven Valleys* 32), using his hand (Ps. 35:2), hearing (Gen. 2:25, Qur'an 2:186, 44:6, Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 255), laughing (Pss. 2:4, 37: 13, 59:8, Prov. 1:26), resting (Gen. 2:2, Heb. 4:4), seeing (Gen. 18:21, Qur'an 3: 163; Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 255), sleeping (Ps. 35:2), standing (Ps. 35:2), and walking or moving (Gen. 3:8, Job 22:14, Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The World Order* 109).

Insofar as Israel is the Bride of God (Hos. 2:2-3, 14–16), it can be said that God is given a male gender and engages in courting and marriage. The use of gender shifts in scripture: God can represent either the male (Hos. 2:2–3) or the female nature (Isa. 66: 12–13). Gender types are used to emphasize different aspects of God. Typically, the female principle signifies immanence, represented as *sophia* (wisdom), the holy spirit, or the revelation—all of which are arguably synonyms. Because the gender of God can be shifted, the community of believers (e.g., Israel or the Church) can also be either male (Isa. 66: 12–13) or female (Hos. 2:2–3). The soul is symbolically female, whether it be the soul of a man or a woman. 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments, “in some passages in the Holy Books where women are mentioned, they represent the soul of man” (*Some Answered Questions* 123). This interpretation finds its most compelling support in the symbolism of the Song of Songs. From the text it is understood that God (and in later interpretations, Christ) is the bridegroom, and the bride signifies the individual souls of Israel or the Church.²⁸ The bride motif also exists in Bahá'í scripture. Bahá'u'lláh, for example, likens his revelation to a “*mystic and wondrous Bride*” (*Hidden Words* 51). The symbolic use of male and female gender (whichever way it is applied to God, a prophet, or a revelation²⁹) affords the development of the *sacred* marriage symbolism, wherein the male and female, immanence and transcendence, mercy and justice, and so on, are joined together in a divine harmony.

Symbolism involving receiving or hearing a “Word” from God (as in to hear a voice, i.e., vocalized sounds) can also be classed as anthropomorphic when the text suggests a direct and actual “Word of God.” That is to say, insofar as God is said to articulate sounds, such terminology suggests a mouth and vocal cords. A literal conception of a “Word” spoken by God would therefore give untenable material qualities to God. Bahá'u'lláh writes that “the celestial Melody” is “above the strivings of [the] human ear to hear” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 168) and again, “the Word of God . . . is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive” (*Tablets* 140). Therefore, it follows that there is no “voice” as such, apart from the voice of the prophet, whose voice is *equated*

²⁸ This symbolism was also used in the New Testament when John the Baptist refers to Christ, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom [i.e., the Messiah]” (John 3:29). However, the metaphor of the bride in John 3:29 is ambiguous. She could represent either Israel or the Church, since this symbolism is used for both (cf. Hos. 2:19-29; Eph. 5:32). Another possibility is that John the Baptist has the Maiden (Wisdom/Sophia) in mind (cf. Wisd. of Sol. 7:27). Even though Sophia can also be connected with the ministry of John, so could Israel. It is perhaps possible to resolve the meaning of the statement, by focusing on John's primary intention, which is his desire to place himself in a subordinate role to that of Christ. That is to say, even though John could theoretically be the bridegroom, he wishes to say that Jesus alone is the one who will truly be the bridegroom of Israel, or possibly, the one whose consort is Sophia. Also, Christ refers to his followers as the “children of the bridechamber” (Matt. 9:15, King James Version). If his followers are the Church, which is also equated with the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:27), then symbolized as children, they are, presumably, the children born of the marriage of bridegroom (Christ) and the bride (the maiden Sophia). No strong position can be taken, however, since the meaning of the text (Gk: *huios*) is ambiguous and could be translated as “friends” (New King James Version), “guests” (New International Version), or “attendants” (Jerusalem Bible), instead of “children.”

²⁹ On the motherhood of God in Christian interpretation, see, for example, *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*: “the Prayer to St Paul” lines 397ff.; Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, chap. 58–63, and Hildegard's interpretation of Luke 15:8–10, Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics* 14.

with God's "voice" (Exod. 3:18, cf. 7:1; Deut. 18:18-19; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 180–81). That people are said to hear the voice of God (Luke 3:22) or that it is like "the roar of thunder" (Exod. 9:23, 29) can be understood metaphorically.

The term "name of God," like "face of God," is an important liturgical theophanic symbol. In ancient times a name signified the nature of the bearer, a person's character and being. With reference to God, it implies the existence of a Being who has will, a mind, and who is accessible, but it is, however, not a truly anthropomorphic symbol inasmuch as it does not necessarily attribute a human or any other type of form to God. To know God's "name" symbolizes close association.

Other traditional anthropomorphic symbols, but not directly related to the being of God, are angels and maidens. In connection with the accounts of the ministries of Daniel, Jesus, and Muḥammad, the symbol of the Angel Gabriel is prominent. Gabriel is also used in connection with Bahá'u'lláh's theophany, but the most dominant symbol is the Maiden (Arabic: *ḥurí*). The Maiden appears in some form in most major religious traditions (i.e., Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and even Buddhist), most notably the Jewish sapiential books (e.g., Proverbs, Job, and the Wisdom of Solomon).

Perhaps the most provocative anthropomorphic symbolism—which is involved with much of the anthropomorphic symbolism mentioned above—occurs when a prophet claims to be God. This type of symbolism is most apparent in the ministry of Jesus and that of Bahá'u'lláh—although there are, for example, a few instances involving Muḥammad and the Imam 'Alí in Islamic traditions.³⁰ The understanding and meaning of their claims to divinity is, of course, a controversial and complex issue, too involved to be adequately explored here. In addition to these, there are certain naturalistic symbols such as "clouds," "fire," and "water." "Glory" is also a characteristic theophanic symbol in biblical and Bahá'í scripture, and since it is often presented so as to suggest light or radiance, it can be viewed as naturalistic.

The Theological Types and Uses of Theophanic Symbols

That anthropomorphic or naturalistic symbolism exist in Bahá'í scripture is clear enough from the above citations. What remains is to explore the questions: Why does Bahá'u'lláh use such symbolism and what is the significance and purpose of his claim to be God?

³⁰ See, for example, John 14:7–11. In some respects, before the ministry of Jesus, God's immanence and presence in Israelite religion was symbolized by the Temple (and most specifically, the Ark of the Covenant, which resided in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple). The teaching that the human form and person of Jesus replace symbolically the Temple (John 2: 19–21) may have been an important basis for apostolic thinking about the divinity of Christ (Col. 1:9–18). In John's version of the Gospel the equation between Jesus and the Temple occurs early in his ministry as a veiled statement of Jesus' divinity, which is only perceived by the Apostles. It appears as a prelude to the more overt divinity claims Jesus makes as his ministry unfolds. It is possible to see a natural progression from eschatological fulfillment (Zech. 6:12) to divine immanence in the equations between the Temple and the body of Christ, and then the resurrection of Christ and the establishment of the Church: In Israelite religion the locus of divinity is the Temple (representing the law and the priesthood), which is then superseded by the authority of Christ (established through eschatological fulfillment, direct teaching, and miracles). The risen body of Christ is understood as a symbol of the body of the Church and, thus, authority is conferred by the use of symbolism and scriptural authority on the Church (the new administration of the law and priesthood). Similarly, there is often a close connection between the same fulfillment of the Zechariah Temple prophecy and Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be God or to represent the presence of God on earth. See Bahá'u'lláh, *Proclamation* 39; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 95, 210, 212–13; *The World Order* 109. For Muḥammad, see C. E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, and Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 153, 162. For Imám 'Alí, see B. T. Lawson, "The Lights of Certainty" 267–73, and Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 166–68.

The view is sometimes expressed that anthropomorphic representations of God signify a primitive stage in the development of Hebrew religion.³¹ This argument assumes that as the religion evolved the presence of God was indicated by symbolic intermediaries such as angels, columns of fire, and clouds. In this way a more transcendental concept of God was suggested (Hastings, *Dictionary Bible* 5:331; Richardson, *Theological Word Book* 90–91). Integral to this argument is the belief that pantheism and monism are characteristics of primitive culture and that the natural religious evolutionary trend was toward some form of deism. However, in the progressive course of Western religious history (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í and Bahá'í Revelations) anthropomorphic language has persisted, both in eschatology and mysticism (where it might be least expected) and sometimes intermixed (e.g., Exod. 33:20-33).

On balance, if such an evolution took place, it cannot be said that anthropomorphic symbolism is an inherent characteristic of primitive religion. Whereas anthropomorphism stresses immanence (i.e., the closeness of God's presence and activity in creation),³² symbolic intermediaries, such as angels and feminine personifications of wisdom, are sometime used in scripture to stress transcendence (i.e., the distinct, incomprehensible, and inaccessible reality of God). Both characteristics are conveyed in scriptural symbolism, and it can be argued that both are important and enduring aspects of theology.

Rather than an evolution from pantheism to theism and even on to deism, it is perhaps just as reasonable to view pantheistic and deistic statements as two poles or intentionally coexisting scriptural extremes—one emphasizing immanence, while the other emphasizes transcendence.³³ The emphasis could be shifted from one to the other according to the requirements of a particular discourse. That is, they co-existed not just in separate religious traditions but also in the same religious systems. A prophet or redactor of tradition might use separate symbols or the same symbol in different ways to teach both the transcendence and the immanence of the divine. The

³¹ Delitzsch, for example, referred to what he called “those anthropomorphous and anthropopathic views of the deity which are peculiar to the youth of the human race” (*Babel and Bible* 75). It has been argued that the appearance of anthropomorphic symbolism in certain portions of Genesis is evidence that such passages belong to an earlier, more primitive era of Israelite thought. This is one of the arguments used to support the theory that the Book of Genesis is a composite of different sources from different periods of Israelite history. See W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *Introduction to the Books* 55. See also Russell, *The Jews from Alexander to Herod* 132–33.

³² The idea of a “personal” God is communicated most strongly in scripture by the use of anthropomorphic symbolism. The Bahá'í Faith teaches the existence of a personal God: Shoghi Effendi says that in the *Kitáb-i-Iqán* Bahá'u'lláh “proclaims unequivocally the existence and oneness of a personal God” (*God Passes By* 139). In a 21 April 1939 letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi comments on the meaning of this belief, “What is meant by a personal God is a God Who is conscious of His creation, Who has a Mind, a Will, a Purpose, and not, as many scientists and materialists believe, an unconscious and determined force operating in the universe. Such conception of the Divine Being, as the Supreme and ever present Reality in the world, is not anthropomorphic, for it transcends all human limitations and forms, and does by no means attempt to define the essence of Divinity which is obviously beyond any human comprehension. To say that God is a personal Reality does not mean that He has a physical form, or does in any way resemble a human being. To entertain such belief would be sheer blasphemy” (*Lights of Guidance* 477).

³³ It can be argued that the Bahá'í Faith is opposed to any literal pantheism (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 34) or deism, its central imagery and cosmology being basically theistic. However, it is not the purpose of this study to categorize the Bahá'í Faith as theistic, as this may be too simplistic and can be taken so as to give a literalness to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings that may, in fact, be exaggerated. It is perhaps best to keep in mind both the inadequacy of language to express ultimate reality and the ways in which symbols and cosmologies are used in scripture to evoke human responses. The cosmologies of different religions—for example, Buddhism and Christianity—seem sometimes to be contradictory, but the spiritual phenomenological results are often essentially the same. Bahá'u'lláh's own discourse on the “inmost Reality” suggests that all cosmologies contain an aspect of the truth, but no cosmology can adequately represent the totality of truth (see *Kitáb-i-Iqán* 97–103). Cosmological symbolism may belong more to the realm of vision than ontology.

two tendencies evident in Genesis, for example, could be from two ancient and separate traditions blended into one theology,³⁴ or they could have simply originated with one composer, as with the composition of Bahá'í scripture. It is, of course, possible to isolate one emphasis to the exclusion of the other to form a pantheistic or deistic theology.

The need to maintain a balance or some form of co-existence between these two tendencies seems important. To identify God too directly with creation—especially as in a total pantheistic belief that God and creation are one and the same reality—places humankind in the context of comprehending, manipulating, controlling, and even transcending the Godhead. From this perspective, humankind has nothing higher to aspire to than its own self. The other extreme—the deistic belief that God is too transcendent to be involved in creation—negates the possibility of revealed truth or any form of divinely inspired redemptive activity. From this extreme, humankind is cut off in experience and purpose from the sacred and left without redemptive hope. Moreover, as a theological presupposition, deism necessitates the denial or secularization of the redemptive evidence and divinity presented by the historic Manifestations of God.

The subject of, and debates over, immanence and transcendence are too complex to explore fully here. The purpose for presenting the above points is to outline briefly a few of the basic issues relating to the concepts of immanence and transcendence before examining these concepts in relation to specific theophanic symbols.

First, it should be stressed that it is not so much the type of symbol which conveys immanence or transcendence, but how the symbol is used. Symbols that represent intermediaries between the created realm and the realm of God signify separation and therefore transcendence. Symbols that signify the direct presence of God in creation represent immanence, such as the anthropomorphic symbols: God's face, hands, word. Also, use of anthropomorphic symbolism in the first-person by a prophet—such as when a prophet claims to be God or to be the face of God—also signifies God's direct and immediate presence, and therefore indicates immanence.

The appearance of the “Maiden” (the feminine personification of Wisdom) can be viewed as a symbol of transcendence insofar as the Maiden is an intermediary like an angel who stands between the realms of God and creation. However, because of the Maiden's feminine nature, this symbol can also be viewed as a symbol of immanence. This is because the Maiden can be

³⁴ The generally accepted view among academics is that the Genesis narratives are a composite of documents or oral traditions dating from different periods in Israelite religious history. This view is usually referred to as the “documentary hypothesis,” a theory that became accepted largely through the work of Julius Wellhausen (see Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Living World* 21–25, 452–54; Stephen Bigger, *Creating* 96ff.). It is, however, contested from a number of perspectives (e.g., U. Cassuto, *Documentary Hypothesis*; R. N. Whybray, *Making of the Pentateuch*; Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*). In Bahá'í scripture, the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis is rejected (e.g., ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 123), but viewing Bahá'í scripture on the surface there is no more evidence for the documentary hypothesis than can be found in the words of Jesus recorded in the New Testament. The text of Genesis is treated in traditional fashion as one text forming a part of the Pentateuch (as suggested by Shoghi Effendi's rendering of the term “torat” as “Pentateuch”) attributed, at least in principal inspiration, to Moses (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 84–89, 199) and with a possible later restoration by Ezra being implied (e.g., ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 40–41; *Divine Philosophy* 124). Apart from a passage from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* (The Heavenly Table, Part II, pp. 216–17, a portion of which is translated in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, March 13, 1986; see *Lights of Guidance* 500), there is nothing that can be effectively interpreted as support for such a hypothesis in actual Bahá'í scripture, though some Bahá'ís are committed to the documentary view. Moreover, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's comment recorded in the *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* may not refer to a distinction between Genesis and the decalogue, but rather a distinction between what is commonly known as the “Written” Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch), and the so-called “Oral” Torah (those later books among which is included the Talmud, to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers in *Promulgation* 161). This, however, does not necessarily mean that the documentary hypothesis is contrary to Bahá'í teaching or untrue.

understood as a representation derived in part from the ancient and pervasive goddess myth—that is, the feminine goddess which represented divinity in creation. This close relationship between female symbols and immanence is too dominant in ancient symbolism for it to be entirely neglected in later scriptural forms.³⁵

Symbols of Immanence

As can be seen from the above references, anthropomorphic language is sustained throughout the history of sacred literature up to and including Bahá'í scripture. Although such symbolism is infrequent in the Qur'án, it is more common in Sufi literature.³⁶ The dominant message communicated by these symbols is the immanence of God, God's active relationship with human beings, and God's presence in the world. It is a symbol about communion and fellowship with God.

Of particular importance to Bahá'í theology is how such symbolism is used in biblical and quranic eschatology. In its eschatological context, two anthropomorphic symbols come together: (1) The appearance of God in the ideal Garden (of Eden), and (2) God's reappearance, so to speak, in the form of the prophet, who represents the Personhood of God (and whose mission is to once again re-create the ideal Garden).

In the Book of Genesis we are presented with the presence of God in the ideal Garden (the first book of the traditional Jewish canon), and in the Book of Revelation (the last book of most traditional Christian canons) we find the promise of its restoration. Here it speaks of the appearance of God, when “God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:3) in the end times. The ideal state—paradise—is, therefore, attainment to the presence of God, and this is to be realized on earth at a time or “day” when God is promised to appear or reappear (that is, to become once again immanent in the life of humankind).

This symbolism is undoubtedly related to the pervasive “Day of the Lord” eschatology running through Old Testament literature and arguably the underlying root of the same in the Qur'an (e.g., 2:46, 2:249, 13:2, 18:111). The actual realization of this eschatological restoration of the primal Garden of God is expressed in Bahá'í scripture (cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 27–28; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 12–13; cf. Rev. 21:4). It can also be said that it is realized or actualized in Bahá'u'lláh's mystic claim to Godhood.³⁷

Bahá'u'lláh further places Shi'í eschatology in the context of his own theology by asserting the prophetic tradition that the Qá'im will pronounce a word which will put the religious leaders to flight refers to a change in the quranic monotheistic confession of faith: “Say: He is God, the One and Only” (Qur'án 112:1; see Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 258). The change consists of the startling transfer of “He” for “I,” that is, “I am God.” For a human being to claim to be God (i.e., incarnate)³⁸

³⁵ It can be argued that the Maiden in Bahá'í scripture and Sophia in sapiential scripture (Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus) are feminine symbols, which are a radical transformation of the goddess myth and, as such, wholly independent of ancient monist connotations. However, the Maiden and Sophia are closely identified with creation (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 283; Wisd. of Sol. 8: 1). The identification of the feminine with creation is also seen in the phrase “Mother Earth” in the apocryphal (2 Escl. 7:62). Various forms of the goddess have been explored recently from a Jungian-environmentalist perspective in Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's *Myth of the Goddess*, and from a more partisan feminist perspective in Caitlin Matthews's, *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom*.

³⁶ See Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Symbolism*, vol. 1.

³⁷ See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 43, 53, 143, 239–40, 247.

³⁸ The Gospel of John does claim that Jesus is God in the flesh: “the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh” (John 1:1, 14; New King James). It is from the Latin translation of these words (became flesh/in *came*) that the term

is, in Islamic theology, a shocking blasphemy. However, the Qur'án does not anticipate another prophet in the type of explicit language found in the New Testament³⁹ but rather, speaks of the appearance or presence of God in the final Day of Judgment (see, for example, Qur'án 5:96, 13:2, 39:67, 89:21–30; cf. Rev. 21:3). It is one of the great conundrums of Islamic theology to explain how God could actually appear without at the same time compromising his transcendence. When Bahá'u'lláh exchanges “He” for “I,” he is, in effect, explaining that the appearance of God in the Day of Judgment refers to the appearance of his Messenger through whom God speaks in the first-person. The claim is also clearly intended to indicate the fulfillment of past scriptural prophecies (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 138–43).

Although the Báb stresses that “Him Whom God shall make manifest”⁴⁰ will proclaim that he is God (The Báb, *Selections* 98; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 43, 53), he provides indications that such a proclamation should not be given a literal anthropomorphic meaning: “He [Him Whom God shall make manifest] would answer them with words not of His Own, but divinely inspired, saying: ‘Verily, verily, I am God; no God is there but Me. I have called into being all the created things, I have raised up divine Messengers in the past and have sent down Books unto Them. Take heed not to worship anyone but God, He Who is My Lord and your Lord’” (The Báb, *Selections* 101). In this passage, the statement, “I am God” is said to be “words not of His Own,” and in the course of the proclamation, the proclaimer shifts from first-person “I am God,” to the third-person “He Who is My Lord.”

In many of his writings, Bahá'u'lláh explains his claims and denies he ever identified himself as God incarnate.⁴¹ Nevertheless, many writers distorted his teachings about his station in order to attack him and his followers. It does appear, however, that some of his followers became confused over this issue. Some early evidence of this can be seen in a tablet by Bahá'u'lláh to Jamál-i-Burújirdí.⁴² In 1932, J. R. Richards, in his book *The Religion of the Bahá'is*, asserts that in Iran, the belief that Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be God incarnate is “an article of faith for some Bahá'is today.” However, he rejects the view as a misunderstanding, “A careful study serves to show that he did not actually make any such claim” (*Religion* 81). Only two years later, Shoghi Effendi felt that the international status of the religion necessitated that its “root principles be now definitely clarified” (*The World Order* 99). He then presents an overview of Baha'u'llah's claims (*The World Order* 99–112) and concludes (112–119) by clarifying how these claims should *not* be understood: That is, he emphasizes that Bahá'u'lláh is not God incarnate (112–13), that Bahá'u'lláh is “essentially one of these Manifestations of God” in a continuing series of Manifestations (114, cf. 166), and that Bahá'u'lláh is not the last Manifestation destined to appear (115ff.).

incarnation is derived. This need not, however, be viewed as contradicting the Qur'án. Jesus Christ is God incarnate, insofar as he, like all other Manifestations of God, is the complete incarnation of the names and attributes of God (cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 112).

³⁹ The Gospels devote considerable attention to Christ's promise that the “Son of Man” will return “in the glory of his Father” (Matt. 16:27). This theme is the central concern of Jesus' last major sermon, the Olivet discourse (see, Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and, according to Bahá'í exegesis, also John 14–16). The appearance of the Son of Man is explained in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* as referring to Muḥammad, but Bahá'u'lláh indicates that they are archetypal and as such also refer to his own ministry. In contrast to the messianic eschatology that spans the entire New Testament canon, the Qur'án only refers to the future appearance of prophets in this manner, “the prophets and the witnesses will be brought forward” on the Day of Judgment (Qur'án 39:69).

⁴⁰ The phrase “Him Whom God shall make manifest” was used by the Báb to refer to the promised Messenger of God that was to appear after him.

⁴¹ See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 41, 119.

⁴² See *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 5. 1-2 (Jan. 1991): 4–12 for a full provisional translation by Khazeh Fananapazir.

Language proclaiming the advent of the Day of God and the presence of God uses anthropomorphic symbolism, but this symbolism should not be interpreted literally. While the symbolism of the “appearance of God in the Day of God” example provided above centers on unfolding the meaning of past prophecies, this symbolism is extended by Bahá’u’lláh to a type of universal theophany. That is to say, the claim to Godhood is seen as a form of symbolism applicable to all other supreme Manifestations⁴³ of God who have appeared in the past, such as Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, and the Báb. For example, Bahá’u’lláh writes so as to equate in each instance the “advent of the Manifestations of God in the sanctified persons of His chosen Ones” with the “face of God Himself” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 4). Through the “light of their countenance, the splendour of the Face of God is made manifest” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 142). In other passages, there are references associating the prophets with the “Hand of omnipotence” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 90), the “eye of God” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 16), “God’s holy Voice” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 215), the “hair” of God (*Prayers and Meditations* 289), and the “Robe of God” (*Gleanings* 308). In some instances these expressions are directly associated with the ministries of particular prophets, such as Jesus (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 19) and Muḥammad (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 178).

The universal nature of such Godhood claims can be seen in the use of symbolism derived from the narrative of Moses’ encounter with Goel on Mount Sinai. The Voice of God said to have been heard on Sinai by Moses is made the special focus of theophanic symbolism in Christian, Bábí, and Bahá’í scriptures. On Sinai, God identifies himself to Moses as “I AM” (Exod. chap. 3). Later Jesus uses this expression to identify himself with the eternal and transcendent reality of God that Moses encountered.⁴⁴ Similarly, both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh identify themselves with the theophany on Sinai.⁴⁵

⁴³ By “supreme Manifestations” is here meant historical persons such as Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muḥammad, and Bahá’u’lláh, and not any other form of manifestation of God in the human or natural world. Although there are many ways in which God is manifest, according to Bahá’u’lláh, “Man” excels all others “in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory. And of all men, the most accomplished, the most distinguished and the most excellent are the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 102–3). From this passage it seems that there is a sense in which there are many Manifestations in each age, but likewise in each age there is one which is “supreme” over all the rest. There was no Manifestation greater, for example, than Moses until the time of Jesus, making Jesus, therefore, the “supreme Manifestation” for the Mosaic age. In some instances, nevertheless, there were other prophets between the time of Moses and Christ, and these would, according to Bahá’í teaching, also be Manifestations of God (see *Lights of Guidance* 368). In some instances, Bahá’u’lláh is spoken of as “the supreme Manifestation” (for example, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Will and Testament* 19; emphasis added). This appellation could be understood to suggest that Bahá’u’lláh is uniquely the supreme Manifestation, in relation to, and as distinct from, for example, Christ or Muḥammad. However, within authoritative Bahá’í texts, the term does not seem to be used for such a distinction. The use of the definitive article *the* seems to be intended in the context of the Bahá’í dispensation—that is to say, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá used this terminology in his *Will and Testament* to stress and clarify that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was *not* a Manifestation of God (see Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 132–39) and that Bahá’u’lláh was the Manifestation of God succeeding the dispensation of the Báb. This understanding is simply based on the historical context—that is, this statement in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Will and Testament* appears to be written, in part, in response to the accusations of “Covenant-breakers” who argued that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had claimed to be a Manifestation of God. Moreover, in other contexts, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the term in its plural, i.e., “supreme Manifestations,” a translation of *mazahir-i-kullíyyih* (see *Some Answered Questions* 158–59, 172–74; also translated as “universal manifestations” in the earlier editions: cf. Shoghi Effendi, *Dawr-i-Bahá’i* 51; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Mufávadát* 112, 113, 117). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also indicates specifically that Christ is a supreme Manifestation of God (*Some Answered Questions* 174; *Mufávadát* 122–24). The term does not, therefore, appear to be a technical term unique to Bahá’u’lláh or to be intended to distinguish him from other supreme Manifestations, such as Moses, Buddha, Christ, or Muḥammad.

⁴⁴ “Jesus said unto them, ‘Most assuredly, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I AM’” (John 8:58).

⁴⁵ See, the Báb, *Selections* 50, 72, 74; Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 265.

The central message of this symbolism points to the belief that it is through these Manifestations of God that humankind is able to attain to God's presence and restore the primal paradise. This presence of God does not refer, of course, to their incarnate reality, but to the revelation of God of which they are the bearers (i.e., the divine laws and will of God that they reveal). Their presence, which is equated with the presence of God, is therefore not confined solely to their physical presence in this world. Attainment to their presence is achieved not physically, but spiritually through the recognition of, and obedience to, the truth that they reveal. Through this obedience to the divine will, the harmony lost by disobedience—symbolized in the Book of Genesis by the expulsion from Paradise—is restored. Bahá'u'lláh's writings indicate that the greatest realization of this paradise is attained through the recognition of the oneness of humankind and universal peace on the entire globe, and he prophesied that this would be realized in this age or "Day" of God.

The above points suggest that symbols of immanence point principally to an affirmation of God's redemptive activity in creation. Behind the symbols of immanence—that is, Bahá'u'lláh's claim to speak as God and to be God—is his own explanation that he is acting as a channel for the divine presence, a presence emanating from a wholly incomprehensible and unapproachable realm.⁴⁶ Apart from the type of anthropomorphic symbolism outlined above, this emanation of divinity is expressed through symbols that can be categorized as symbols of transcendence.

Symbols of Transcendence

In simultaneous contrast, and in balance, to the anthropomorphic symbols examined above, there are various symbols employed in scripture to indicate a supernatural and intermediary mode of revelation, such as God's Spirit, angel, and the personification of various attributes, most notably "glory" and "wisdom." Other symbols that are not specifically anthropomorphic which act as intermediaries between God and creation are the Burning Bush (Exod. 3:4), the cloud (Num. 10:33), the pillar of fire (Exod. 13:21f.), the ark (Num. 7:89, 10:35f.; 1 Sam. 4), and the dove⁴⁷ (Matt. 3:16). In addition to symbolic expressions, there are what can be viewed as "direct" and "indirect" modes of divine encounter. The indirect modes, such as signs, visions, and dreams may in certain cases involve both actual psychological phenomena or be symbolic. The "direct" mode or encounter refers to such accounts as Moses seeing God "face to face,"⁴⁸ and in such cases as this, the terminology is entirely symbolic.

⁴⁶ In *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, a letter written by Shoghi Effendi, the divine claims of Bahá'u'lláh are brought into context with, and clarified in light of, Bahá'u'lláh's own teachings from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. See Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 99ff.

⁴⁷ It is interesting that Bahá'u'lláh gives the title *Qasídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih* to an ode he wrote in praise of the Maiden personifying the Spirit of God that descended upon him (see *God Passes By* 118). This title can be translated as "Ode to the Dove." In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh uses the symbol of the "Dove"—no doubt, signifying the holy spirit—to address the rulers of America with a message on behalf of God (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 52). In another passage in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh identifies the "Mystic Dove" with himself (82). For other similar references, see *Epistle* 40, 141; *Gleanings* 36; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 254, and *Prayers and Meditations* 63, 106, 234, 255, 295, 330. In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, the "Dove of Eternity" is identified with the revelation of the Qur'án.

⁴⁸ This writer knows of no similar symbolism in Bahá'í scripture wherein Bahá'u'lláh claims to have seen God face to face. There is, however, a comparable, though different type of symbolism expressed in John's version of the Gospel: Philip asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." To this request, Jesus replies, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:8-9). Also, Nabíl, the apostle of Bahá'u'lláh and early Bahá'í historian,

In Bahá'u'lláh's writings many of these symbols and indirect modes are present: He speaks of the appearance of Gabriel, the Maiden (whom he identifies with the personification of wisdom),⁴⁹ a dream, a voice, a spirit, and so on. Numerous passages throughout many of Bahá'u'lláh's writings refer to his theophany, however, some passages provide what may be regarded as descriptions of the phenomenon itself. Shoghi Effendi cites *six* such passages in *God Passes By* (101–2). Of these, five provide symbols to describe the event.

Two are late passages found in the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (11, 21–22, 39), an epistle completed in 1892, the last year of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry; one is from the *Súratu'l-Haykal*, one from the epistle to Násiri'd-Dín *Sháh*, and one from the *Lawḥ-i-Siráj*,⁵⁰ 50 which can be found in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (103). Since it is known that the Maiden appears in his early works (the Tablet of the Holy Mariner and the *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'iyiyih*: see Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 118, 123), all these tablets together show examples of symbolic intermediaries in autobiographical descriptions spanning from the earliest part of his ministry to the last. An outline of these passages shows the following symbols:

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf:

- a voice;
- a flowing torrent;
- a fire.

“Súrih of the Temple”:

- a Maiden.

“Epistle to Násiri'd-Dín *Sháh*”:

- the breezes of the All-Glorious;
- the hand of the will of Thy Lord.

Lawḥ-i-Siráj:

- the Voice of the Holy Spirit, standing on his right;
- the Most Great Spirit appearing before his face;
- Gabriel overshadowing him;
- the Spirit of Glory stirring within him.

Viewed in isolation, the event or phenomenon is apparently described differently each time. Different symbols emerge with what appears to be a liberal poetic or literary freedom. In these passages, no attempt is made to correlate or harmonize one description with earlier ones, suggesting that the descriptions are not rigid attempts to describe literal occurrences, such as the actual existence or hypostasis of a Maiden. Insofar as these symbols are intermediaries between God's realm and creation, they convey the separateness and transcendence of God's reality, but

records an episode wherein a watch-maker, after seeing Bahá'u'lláh, exclaimed “By God! I saw the Father of Christ” (from an unpublished portion of Nabil's history as quoted in H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* 268).

⁴⁹ Bahá'u'lláh writes in Words of Paradise (*Kalimát-i-Firdawsiyyih*) that “Wisdom is God's Emissary and the Revealer of His Name the Omniscient. . . . 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” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 66). This passage refers to Bahá'u'lláh's theophany in the prison of Tehran in the year nine (i.e., 1269 A.H. of the Islamic calendar), which is A.D. 1852-53. See Sours “Maid of Heaven” 57.

⁵⁰ I wish to thank Khazeh Fananapazir for identifying this tablet for me.

each can convey transcendence in other ways as well. They are, in fact, sufficiently rich in different meanings and historic connections so as to be the subject of multiple studies. Necessarily, this study will examine briefly only a few.

The Angel

The term “angel” serves much the same purpose as the terms “voice” and “dream.” Whereas a “voice” signifies communication through the form of hearing and a “dream” or “vision” signifies communication through the form of sight, the term “angel” signifies a communication brought by a messenger. In various scriptural uses, these representations of communication are used jointly, that is, angels are described as appearing in a dream or vision or outwardly (in person).⁵¹

An angel appears to the Prophet Daniel to explain Daniel’s vision (Dan. 8: 16, 9:21); an angel appears to Jacob in a dream (Gen. 31: 11); and in the Gospel, “the angel . . . appeareth to Joseph in a dream” (Matt. 2:13, also 1:20). Possible outward examples include the appearance of an “angel of the Lord” to Moses in “flames and fire from within a bush” (Exod. 3:2); also an angel is said to have called out from heaven to Hagar (Gen. 21: 17) and to Abraham (Gen. 22:11, 22:15). In the New Testament, an “Angel of the Lord” appears to a group of shepherds and announces the birth of Christ: “An Angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified” (Luke 2:9). The same angel is said to have been suddenly joined by a “company of heavenly host” praising God (Luke 2: 13).

Bahá’u’lláh does not actually mention “Gabriel” (Arabic: *Jibríl*) by name in the original Persian⁵² of the passage “Gabriel overshadowed me” from the *Lawḥ-i-Siráj*. He uses the term “*rúḥ al-amín*” (literally, the faithful spirit), which Shoghi Effendi translates as “Gabriel.” This correlation between *rúḥ al-amín* and Gabriel follows the accepted Muslim view that *ar-rúḥ al-amín* is the Angel Gabriel intended in the quranic verse: “Verily this [the Qur’án] is a Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds: With it came down *the* Spirit of Faith and Truth—to thy [Muḥammad’s] heart and mind, that thou mayest admonish in the perspicuous Arabic tongue” (emphasis added, Qur’án 26: 192-95, trans. Yusuf Ali).⁵³ There are a number of angels with specific names,⁵⁴ but (in connection with the ministries of prophets) if the theophanic angel is identified, it is Gabriel. In the Bible, Gabriel is mentioned by name only four times, twice in the Book of Daniel (8:16, 9:21) and twice in the Gospel of Luke (1:19, 1:26).⁵⁵ Besides appearing to Daniel in a dream, the Angel Gabriel is said to have been sent openly by God to Nazareth to visit Mary (Luke 1:26–28) and Zacharias (Luke 1: 11–19). In the Qur’án, Gabriel is mentioned by name only twice, once as the one who caused the confirmation of previous Revelations to descend on

⁵¹ By “outwardly” or “in person” is not meant to be a judgment concerning whether or not the appearance was literal, but rather, that this is how the event seems to be described in the scriptural narrative.

⁵² I would like to thank Ms. M. Rohani for her assistance concerning the original Persian of this passage.

⁵³ The translator, Yusuf Ali, adds this note, “Rúḥ-ul-amín, the epithet of Gabriel, who came with the inspired Messages to the holy Prophet is difficult to render in a single epithet in translation. . . . A further signification as attached to the Spirit of Inspiration is that it is the very quintessence of Faith and Truth, unlike the lying spirits which delude men with falsehood” (*The Holy Qur’an*, fn. 3224, p. 969).

⁵⁴ ‘Izrá’íl (see Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 26), Isráfíl (Raphael), Mikhá’íl (Michael), and Jibríl (Gabriel).

⁵⁵ Five times, if the Deuterocanonical book of Tobit is included (1: 14). Gabriel does, of course, appear in many other noncanonical books and in much folklore and tradition. See, for example, 1 Enoch 9: 1, 40:9, 54:6, 71:13 (see Charlesworth, *Old Testament*, vol. 1), the *Epistula Apostolorum* (passage 15), the Gospel of Bartholomew 4:29 (Schneemelcher, ed. *New Testament* 1:199, 487).

the heart of Muḥammad (2:91) and once as the protector of Muḥammad (66:4). In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the Angel Gabriel as the “Voice of Inspiration” (117).⁵⁶

Referring to his own theophany, Bahá'u'lláh states that the Angel Gabriel “overshadowed” him (*God Passes By* 102), meaning to cover or stand above. This expression occurs in many references in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.⁵⁷ The description is similar to the description of Gabriel’s visit to Mary. Gabriel reassures Mary telling her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow [Gk. *episkiazo*] you” (Luke 1:35). This same term appears in all three accounts of the transfiguration, and in each account a voice comes from the cloud proclaiming the station of Christ.

Similarly, the “cloud,” which is also used as a biblical symbol of God’s presence, is said to “overshadow” the Israelites (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 85). When Moses completed the construction of the tabernacle (the predecessor of the Jerusalem Temple), which contained the tablets of the revealed Law, the texts of Exodus states that “then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34, New King James). The text ends with the verse, “The cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys” (Exod. 40:38, New King James). The cloud covering, or overshadowing, the tabernacle represented the abiding and powerful presence of God in the revealed Law. The theophanic use of the term “angel” in Bahá’í scripture, no doubt, follows upon this metaphorical tradition and is probably meant to convey the same significance.

The Spirit (Holy Spirit, Most Great Spirit, and Spirit of Glory)

In one passage Bahá'u'lláh uses the word *spirit* three times in connection with his theophany:

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 Spirit⁵⁸ appeared before My face, and Gabriel overshadowed Me, and the Spirit of Glory stirred within My bosom, bidding Me arise and break My silence. (Baha'u'llah, cited by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* 102, cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 103)

Shoghi Effendi identifies the Most Great Spirit with the “same Spirit” symbolized as the Burning Bush, the Dove, the Angel Gabriel (*Messages to America* 100, *God Passes By* 101). In this particular context, it seems that all these references to “Spirit” (Holy Spirit,⁵⁹ *rúh al-qudus*;

⁵⁶ For other references, see *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 50, 86, 109, 164.

⁵⁷ For example, *Prayers and Meditations* 28, 63, 83; *Tablets* 86.

⁵⁸ This term “Most Great Spirit” (*rúh al-a'zám*) is also translated by Shoghi Effendi—in a different translation of the same passage—as “Supreme Spirit” (cf. *Gleanings* 103). The term “Holy Spirit” (*rúh al-qudus*) in this same passage is also translated as “Holy Ghost,” an English translation that reflects the terminology of the King James edition of the Bible.

⁵⁹ The theophanic significance of this term is clear from its usage in the New Testament (e.g., the immaculate conception: Matt. 1:18, 20) and the Qur’án (twice in connection with Jesus: 2:81, 254; 5:109, and once in connection with the revelation of the Qur’án 16:104). Its theophanic significance is recognized in Islamic thought, as is clear from the writing of Ibn al-‘Arabi: “At the beginning of the introduction to the *Futúhát*, Ibn al-‘Arabi explains the various kinds of knowledge can be ranked according to excellence: ‘The sciences are of three levels. [The first] is the science of reason. . . . The second is the science of states (*aḥwál*), which cannot be reached except through tasting. . . . The third knowledge is the sciences of mysteries (*asrár*). It is the knowledge which is ‘beyond the stage of reason.’ It is knowledge through the blowing (*naḥṭh*) of the Holy Spirit (*rúh al-qudus*) into the heart (*ru’*), and it is specific to the prophet or the friends of God’” (quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path* 169).

Most Great Spirit, *rūḥ al-a'zám*; and Spirit of Balla, *rūḥ al-bahá*) are actually a collective representation of one Spirit (*rūḥ*). This Spirit, Shoghi Effendi simply referred to as the “Spirit of God,” a term that does not appear as such in any of the various descriptions of Bahá’u’lláh’s theophany cited by Shoghi Effendi (see *God Passes By* 102). Similarly, in the New Testament, the “Spirit of glory” is equated with the “spirit of God” (1 Pet. 4:14). The term “Spirit of God” is the principal term used in connection with the theophany of Jesus: “He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him” (Matt. 3: 16).⁶⁰

In all such cases, the term “Spirit,” if viewed as an existent reality analogous with the human “spirit,” begins to take on anthropomorphic connotations. Insofar as God is completely inaccessible in his being, it cannot be said that God is “spirit” in any sense we can imagine or that there is any direct access to his “Spirit.” Assuming this statement to be true, it follows that “Spirit,” like the “Angel Gabriel” or the Burning Bush, is a symbol representing the presence of God in the world, or a symbolic intermediary connecting the reality of God with creation. This meaning is implied in the term itself, which (in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic) denotes “to breathe,” and the breath is, in ancient understanding, a sign of life.⁶¹ “Spirit,” therefore, conveys the idea of imparting (or emanating) something that gives life.⁶²

In the same passage cited above (*God Passes By* 101–2), Bahá’u’lláh refers to the spirit again using the phrase “spirit of Glory” (*rūḥ al-bahá*). This phrase and his own name, “Bahá’u’lláh,” which literally means “the glory of God,” have longstanding theophanic significance.

In Exodus, it is said that “when Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai” (Exod. 24:15, New International Version). The text adds, “to the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain” (Exod. 24: 16). Later this glory is said to fill the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35), and through sacrificial offerings, the “Lord” (e.g., Lev. 9:1–6)—who is also equated with the “glory of the Lord” (Exod. 9:6)—appeared to the Israelites (Lev. 9:1ff.). In the Book of Exodus it is said that the people were unable to gaze upon the face of Moses after his encounter with God for it shone so brightly—presumably with the glory of God (Exod. 34:29–35). When Ezekiel describes the majesty of “a figure like that of a man . . . high above on a throne” (Ezek. 1:26), he says “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezek. 1:28, New International Version).

In the Torah, the veil over the face of Moses symbolizes the people’s inability to see the light or glory of God. In the New Testament, St. Paul builds upon this symbol by arguing that this veil is taken away through belief in Jesus (2 Cor. 3: 15). Using the analogy of the mirror, he adds,

⁶⁰ This is perhaps the most pervasive theophanic term in the Bible—apart from simply “Spirit” which is understood to be the “Spirit of God”—occurring far more times than “Holy Spirit.” For other biblical references to “Spirit of God,” see: Gen. 1:2, 41:38; Exod. 31:3, 35:31; Num. 24:2; Judg. 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 14:19, 15:14; 1 Sam. 10:6, 10:10, 11:6, 16:13, 16:14, 19:20, 19:23; 2 Sam. 23:2; 1 Kings 18:12, 22:24; 2 Kings 18:12, 22:24; 2 Chron. 15:1, 18:23, 20:14, 24:20; Job 27:3, 33:4; Isa. 40:13, 48:16, 59:19, 61:1, 63:14; Ezek. 11:5, 11:24, 37:1; Mic. 3:8; Matt. 3:16, 10:20, 12:28; Luke 4:18; Rom. 8:9, 8:14, 15: 19; 1 Cor. 2:14, 6:11, 7:40, 12:3; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:30; 1 John 4:2.

⁶¹ In Hebrew “*rúah*,” “breath; air; strength; wind; breeze; spirit; courage; temper; Spirit.” This noun has cognates in Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Arabic. The word occurs about 378 times [in the Bible] and in all periods of biblical Hebrew” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary* 240). In New Testament Greek, the term is *pneuma* “primarily denotes ‘the wind’ (akin to *pneó*, ‘to breathe, blow’) also ‘breath’; then, especially ‘the spirit,’ which, like the wind, is invisible, immaterial and powerful” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary* 593). In Arabic, the word is *rūḥ*: “*Rūḥ* (spirit) derives from the same root as *riḥ* (wind), while *nafs* or soul is written the same as *nafas* (breath). We perceive the presence of the spirit for reasons analogous to our knowledge of the existence of wind: The rustling of the leaves. In the same way, the breathing of a breather signifies the presence of life and the soul” (Sachiko Murata, *Tao of Islam* 229).

⁶² Cf. Gen. 2:7; Qur’án 15:29, 38:72, 32:9.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror⁶³ the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18: New King James).

Commenting on the phrase “glory of God,” the biblical expositor W. E. Vine writes:

When applied to God, the word represents a quality corresponding to Him and by which He is recognized. Joshua commanded Achan to give glory to God, to recognize His importance, worth, and significance (Josh. 7:19). In this and similar instances “giving honor” refers to doing something; what Achan was to do was to tell the truth. In other passages giving honor to God is a cultic recognition and confession of God as God (Ps. 29:1). Some have suggested that such passages celebrate the sovereignty of God over nature wherein the celebrant sees His “glory” and confesses it in worship. In other places the word is said to point to God’s sovereignty over history and specifically to a future manifestation of that “glory” (Isa. 40:5). Still other passages relate the manifestation of divine “glory” to past demonstrations of His sovereignty over history and peoples (Exod. 16:7, 24:16). (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary* 115)

The “glory of God” that appeared on Sinai, and later over the Tabernacle of the Law, is traditionally understood in Christian theology to represent the full manifestation of the attributes of God:

Glory of God expresses the sum total of the divine perfections. The idea is prominent in redemptive revelation: see Isa. 60:1; Rom. 5:2; 6:4. It expresses the form in which God reveals himself in the economy of salvation: see Rom. 9:23; Eph. 1:12; 1 Tim. 1:11. It is the means by which the redemptive work is carried on: see 2 Pet. 1:3; Rom. 6:4; Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:11. It is the goal of Christian hope: see Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 21; Titus 2:13. (Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies* 4:27)

Brockington states, “The ‘glory of God’ is, in effect, the term used to express that which men can *apprehend*, originally by sight, of the presence of God on earth” (from A. Richardson et al., *Theological Word Book* 175). Bahá’u’lláh attributes this station universally to all the Manifestations of God in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (143; see also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* chap. 50).

The glory of God is an indication of the presence of God in the world. These two conceptions—glory and presence—are, therefore, intimately connected in scripture with each other. Referring to the Manifestation of Christ, Brockington writes, “On earth the glory of God was made known in him [Christ], and men apprehended through him the presence of God” (175). This theme takes a dominant position in the New Testament:

Throughout the NT Christ is presented as the glory of God made visible on earth to those whose eyes are open to see it; but it is perhaps in the Fourth Gospel that this conception is most strongly stressed. Behind the Johannine *doxa* (Gk. glory) we must recollect the full biblical richness of the word, as we have described it above. “We beheld his *doxa*, glory as of the only-begotten from the Father” (John 1: 14). The

⁶³ The word *mirror* is a translation of the Greek term *katoptrizomai*, meaning to mirror oneself or see reflected, as in a glass.

miracles of Christ manifested his *doxa* (2:11). His *doxa* is not the glory of men but of God (5:41, 17:5, 17:22). (Richardson, *Theological Word Book* 175–76)

Nowhere, however, is this theme more evident than in connection with Christ's return (the Parousia): "Glory slowly became eschatological, so that in the NT we find it as an integral part of the life of the Kingdom of God, both realized now and expected in the future" (Richardson, *Theological Word Book* 175). Or as Vincent writes:

The Gentiles, in receiving the manifestation of Christ, did not realize all its glory. The full glory of the inheritance was a hope, to be realized when Christ should appear "the second time unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28). (Vincent, *Word Studies* 3:480)

With this in mind, it is easier to appreciate the extraordinary eschatological significance of Bahá'u'lláh's name from a biblical perspective than from the quranic. In the biblical literature the Day of God is primarily expressed in terms of the revelation of the glory of God (e.g., Isa. 2:19, 2:21; Rev. 21:23). In quranic terminology, it is the "presence" of God at the Day of Judgment that is most often indicated. These two expressions are, as acknowledged in Christian theology, one and the same.

It can be argued then that each age in which a supreme Manifestation such as Moses, Christ, or Bahá'u'lláh appears is considered the Day of God and that through these Manifestations there is an appearance of the glory of God. Nevertheless, viewed biblically, the supreme nature and distinction of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation becomes apparent in that two central biblical themes are actualized in the world in this age—the unity of the nations and the oneness of God. Humankind, which is created in the image of God, through world unification manifests the oneness of God. In past ages, the human race has only reflected this oneness in an incomplete and fragmentary way. When Bahá'u'lláh states the "spirit of Glory" has appeared to him, his can be understood as referring to a spirit that represents the mediation of God's presence and the eschatological fulfillment realized through the oneness of humankind—the central purpose and aim of his revelation.

The Maiden

This symbol is too complex to be adequately explored in this brief work. However, there are important corollaries that can be briefly noted between the Maiden and (1) the wisdom and law in biblical and Bahá'í scripture and (2) past theophanic symbols. These corollaries reveal both immanence and transcendence: immanence in regard to the personal experience of the divine through participation in the revealed Law (which, as will be shown, is equated with the Maiden); transcendence through the continuity she represents with theophanies in different ages.

Corollaries with Wisdom and Law

The heavenly Maiden who is mentioned in Bahá'u'lláh's writings may belong to a complex literary tradition. In Bahá'u'lláh's early writings, the Maiden has characteristics parallel to those of Sophia in Jewish sapiential literature, most notably Proverbs (e.g., 4:7, 9:10) and the Wisdom of Solomon.⁶⁴ Late in Bahá'u'lláh's writings she is directly identified with Wisdom (in Persian

⁶⁴ For a preliminary examination of these corollaries, see Sours, "Maid of Heaven."

“*Khīrad*”).⁶⁵ Together with the parallels, this stated connection naturally suggests a strong link with Sophia in the sapiential literature. If he so wished, there are, however, a number of channels from which Bahá’u’lláh could have chosen this symbol to express himself. The use of the Maiden–Wisdom symbol has a longstanding history in various mystical writings both Christian and Islamic.⁶⁶ When the Maiden appears in the Báb’s writings, she is presented as proclaiming his divine station and attributes. He symbolically acts as a channel through which the Maiden addresses humankind with her message concerning the Báb:

O people of the earth! By the righteousness of the One true God, I am the Maid of Heaven begotten by the Spirit of Bahá, abiding within the Mansion hewn out of a mass of ruby, tender and vibrant; and in this mighty Paradise naught have I ever witnessed save that which proclaimeth the Remembrance of Goel by extolling the virtues of this Arabian Youth. (The Báb, *Selections* 54)

Apart from any possible literary origin, this passage points to the cause of the Maiden’s own appearance in the world. The Maiden is said to have been born of the “Spirit of Bahá,” (i.e., the Spirit of Glory) a statement of origin also made in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh (*Gleanings* 284). This is also suggested in the Wisdom of Solomon, which states “she is a breath of the power of God, pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wisd. of Sol. 7:25, Jerusalem Bible) or in another translation, “She rises from the power of God, a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty” (New English Bible: Apocrypha).

As pointed out above, “glory,” and, in particular, the “glory of the Lord” or “glory of God” is used throughout scripture to signify a manifestation of God (i.e., what can be apprehended of God in this plane of existence). That Sophia, or the Maiden, are born of the spirit of glory suggests that her presence in the world of being proceeds from the revelation of God’s glory, and in particular, from the prophets and supreme Manifestations of God. Moreover, Sophia–Maiden is closely associated with the Law of God in both biblical and Bahá’í scripture (Eccles. 19:20; Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 66, 155), and the presence of the Law is also associated with the revelation of God’s glory (Exod. 34:29ff.; 40:34ff.). In this context it can be argued that the Maiden is born into the world through the glory that emanates from the divine Law and which is revealed by the Manifestations of God.

Support for this interpretation can be found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s equations among the eschatological New Jerusalem, “a maiden,” and the divine “Law.” He writes, “The holy City, new Jerusalem, hath come down from on high in the form of a maid of heaven, veiled, beautiful, and unique, and prepared for reunion with her lovers on earth” (*Selections* 12). This statement appears

⁶⁵ *Wisdom* is a feminine noun in Hebrew *hokma*, Greek *sophia*, and Arabic *hikmah*.

⁶⁶ A complex and alternative Sophia mythology was developed within the ancient gnostic tradition (see Hans Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, esp. chap. 8). The more important and influential Christian text, *Mystica Theologia* (Mystical Theology), which purports to be from the pen of Dionysius the Areopagite, begins with a prayer: “Everlasting wisdom who had no beginning, in yourself you are the sovereign goddess and sovereign good with insight into the wisdom of all Christians, which comes from God. I ask for access to the ultimately mysterious light and profundity of your inspiration” (cited from *Letters of Private Direction* 78). Some manuscript editions of the prayer are altered, eliminating the goddess; see *Cloud of Unknowing* 130. These have become somewhat obscure texts but they nevertheless provide some evidence of the widespread appeal of the Sophia symbolism. For an Islamic source within the cultural context of Bahá’u’lláh, see R. W. J. Austin, “The Sophianic Feminine.” It may be that Bahá’u’lláh’s stay in the Takyih, the theological seminary of Mawláná *Khálid* in Sulaymáníyyih where many followers of Ibn Arabi resided, influenced Bahá’u’lláh’s adoption of the feminine imagery of the Maiden.

to be a reference to a passage in the Book of Revelation, “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). In another passage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “The descent of the New Jerusalem denoteth a heavenly Law, that Law which is the guarantor of human happiness and the effulgence of the world of God” (*Selections* 59).

These two passages by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggest that the reunion of the maid of heaven and her “lovers on earth”—the celestial marriage—is essentially a union between the believers and the divine Law. The believers enter into an experiential mystic marriage with the maiden through participating in the revealed Law. The sacred Law is not merely a legal code, but signifies the basis of harmony in the cosmic order. In this way the divine becomes immanent in their lives.

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Corollaries between the Maiden and Past Theophanic Symbols

Corollaries between various terms used by Bahá’u’lláh and in past scriptures to describe theophanic experience are suggested by the comments of Shoghi Effendi as outlined here:

(1) The term “Most Great Spirit” is synonymous with the term “Maiden”: In the actual passages cited above (from *God Passes By* 102–3), Bahá’u’lláh does not identify the Most Great Spirit directly with the Maiden, but Shoghi Effendi states that “the Maiden, symbolizing the “Most Great Spirit” proclaimed His mission to the entire creation” (*God Passes By* 101).

(2) The “Maiden” is synonymous with the term “Spirit of God”: In several other interpretations, Shoghi Effendi also states that the Maiden “personified” the “Spirit of God” (see *God Passes By* 118, 121).⁶⁷ This term, the “Spirit of God,”⁶⁸ is absent from the actual passages cited by Shoghi Effendi (i.e., in *God Passes By* 101-2), but it is a characteristic biblical term used in connection with theophanies, as mentioned above.

(3) The term “Most Great Spirit” is synonymous with theophanic symbolism from preceding revelations: Shoghi Effendi states in one explanation that “the ‘Most Great Spirit,’ . . . revealed itself to Him, in the form of a ‘Maiden,’” and that this Spirit is the “*same* Spirit which, in the Zoroastrian, the Mosaic, the Christian, and Muhammadan Dispensations, had been respectively symbolized by the ‘Sacred Fire,’ the ‘Burning Bush,’ the ‘Dove,’ and the ‘Angel Gabriel’” (emphasis added, *Messages to America* 100; cf. *God Passes By* 101).

This analysis suggests that—at least from the point of view of Shoghi Effendi’s interpretations—that all these terms, the Maiden, the Most Great Spirit, the Spirit of God and even other symbols from past theophanies are all synonyms for the same “Spirit.”⁶⁹ These correspondences between, for example, the Burning Bush and the dove, also suggest the symbolic nature of the Maiden. But what is perhaps most important is the identification of the Most Great

⁶⁷ From the above two equations (Most Great Spirit = Maiden/Maiden = Spirit of God), it also follows that the Most Great Spirit is also synonymous with the Spirit of God.

⁶⁸ This term “Spirit of God” (Arabic, *rúh ’u ’lláh*) is commonly used by Muslims to signify Jesus. See, for example, Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an* 48ff. In almost all instances, this is how the term is used by Bahá’u’lláh, e.g., *Epistle* 48, 51, 52, 81, 89, 92, 100. It is also used with reference to Muḥammad/Gabriel (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 114, 116) and Noah/Gabriel (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 154).

⁶⁹ That such correspondences exist, seems to be logically consistent with Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*.

Spirit with the past theophanies of other supreme Manifestations, such as, Moses, Zoroaster, Christ, Muḥammad, and the Báb. This universality is further reinforced by the Báb's own reference to the Maiden and Bahá'u'lláh's identification of the Maiden in the *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*⁷⁰ with "Wisdom" (who is personified in Old Testament literature and said to appear to the Prophets in each age: Wisd. of Sol. 7:27).

From among the terms "Maiden," "Spirit of God," "Holy Spirit," and "Most Great Spirit," the only theophanic term or phrase that appears unique (in relation to canonical biblical texts), is the phrase "Most Great Spirit," also translated by Shoghi Effendi as "Supreme Spirit."⁷¹ Nevertheless, since the Most Great Spirit is the same Spirit that appeared to past supreme Manifestations, it is clear that the Most Great Spirit was not manifested on this planet for the first time through Bahá'u'lláh.⁷² Apart from the absence of the term in previous canonical texts, the "Most Great Spirit" (*ruh al-a'zám*) is a theophanic term common to Muslim commentaries and used to designate the Angel Gabriel.⁷³

Bahá'u'lláh does not argue that he alone has encountered the Spirit of God for the first time or even that he has encountered it in a phenomenologically unique way. Although, in the Súrih of the Temple, he does write that it is through a single letter of this "Most Great Spirit" that the Holy Spirit has been generated.⁷⁴ This could be interpreted to mean that Bahá'u'lláh is trying to make a phenomenological or hierarchal distinction between the Spirit that appeared to him and that which appeared to past Manifestations. However, from the point of view of Shoghi Effendi's explanation (*Messages to America* 100) this seems unlikely.

It may be possible to understand the nature of the distinction Bahá'u'lláh is making in the Súrih of the Temple, by considering it in light of an analogy 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses to both equate and distinguish between Christ and the Apostles: "The Apostles were even as Letters, and Christ was the essence of the Word Itself; and the meaning of the Word . . . cast a splendour on those Letters." In the same explanation he says, "the Letter is dependent for its value on the Word, that is, it deriveth its grace from the Word; it has a spiritual kinship with the Word, and is accounted an integral part of the Word" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 60). We know that both Christ and the Apostles were inspired by the Spirit of God, nevertheless, there is a great difference between the two stations inasmuch as Christ derived his inspiration from God, whereas the Apostles derived their inspiration from Christ and were dependent upon him. In the same way, the Most Great Spirit can be likened to the essence of the Word or Logos, a single letter of which is capable of generating the Holy Spirit as it is experienced by the believers in each age. Moreover, the believers themselves are not capable of encompassing the whole of the Word, hence the portion from which they derive their inspiration can be likened to a single letter. Viewed from this perspective, Bahá'u'lláh's

⁷⁰ See footnote no. 49 above.

⁷¹ See Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 103.

⁷² As mentioned, the Most Great Spirit is identified with the dove that descends on Christ. This dove is said in the New Testament to represent the "Spirit of God" (Matt. 3: 16), the "Spirit" (Mark 1:10, John 1:32) and the "Holy Spirit" (Luke 3:22). Here, there is a clear connection with the terminology of "Spirit of God" (Matt. 3:16), but neither the Hebrew, New Testament canons, nor the Qur'án use "Most Great Spirit" as a theophanic term.

⁷³ "Gabriel is called in Muslim books *ar-Rúh 'l-A'zám*, 'The Supreme Spirit'; *ar-Rúh 'l-Mukarram*, 'The Honoured Spirit'; *Rúh 'l-Ilqá*, 'The Spirit of casting into'; *Rúh 'l-Qudus*, 'The Holy Spirit'; and *ar-Rúh 'l-Amín*, 'The Faithful Spirit'" (Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam* 133). In theophanic usage the term appears in Ibn 'Arabi's writings (see A. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy*), and it is known that Bahá'u'lláh had contact with 'Arabi's work, the *al-Futúhát-i-Makkíyyih* (see Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 122). Affifi writes that "there are no less than twenty-two terms which Ibnul 'Arabi uses to designate what one might call a Mohammedan Logos" (66). Among these he lists *al ruh al-a'zám*, which he translates as "Most Mighty Spirit."

⁷⁴ See Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 109.

distinction between the Most Great Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not a distinction between the theophanies of the different supreme Manifestations,⁷⁵ but rather, a distinction between the Manifestations and their own followers.

That Bahá'u'lláh does not claim either to have received the Spirit of God for the first time in history or in a different way, are two points important to the message of divine transcendence. The type of theophanic symbolism Bahá'u'lláh uses tells us both the messianic nature of the claim he is making and its universal transcendent character. A supreme theophany is like a comet, a unique celestial event, but one which, nevertheless, reappears in the heavens. In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* Bahá'u'lláh rejects that the superlative character of past revelations could ever mean the finality of divine revelation and the cessation of “the flow of God’s all-encompassing grace and plenteous mercies” (24, 136–37, 233). An important way in which the Maiden acts as a symbol of transcendence is that she transcends the constraints of any particular age, culture, name, and so on, and in this way, she communicates God’s omniscience: “Wisdom [the Maiden] is God’s Emissary and the Revealer of His Name the Omniscient” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 66). She is the mystic Bride that represents the preexistence and eternal grace of God in every age.

Shoghi Effendi’s repeated identification of the Most Great Spirit with past theophanic symbols suggests a desire on his part to preclude the idea of theophanic uniqueness. The terms Bahá'u'lláh uses and the explanations Shoghi Effendi provides seem to affirm the consistent and successive unfoldment of the process of redemptive history and revelation. Shoghi Effendi writes, “those who have recognized the Light of God in this age, claim no finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified, nor arrogate to the Faith they have embraced powers and attributes intrinsically superior to, or essentially different from, those which have characterized any of the religious systems that preceded it” (*The World Order* 59), and again, in another passage, he adds, “Any variations in the splendor which each of these Manifestations of the Light of God has shed upon the world should be ascribed not to any inherent superiority involved in the essential character of any one of them, but rather to the progressive capacity, the ever-increasing spiritual receptiveness, which mankind, in its progress towards maturity, has invariably manifested” (*The World Order* 166).

Voice-Word

In several descriptions of his theophany, Bahá'u'lláh refers to hearing a “voice” or “exalted words” (*Gleanings* 102, *Epistle* 21). Where the term “voice” appears, it is identified as the “Voice of the Holy Spirit”; otherwise, the imagery is unclear as to the source of this voice, though it is said to be standing on his “right hand.” There are three basic observations that can be made from theophanic descriptions of voices and words: (1) Universality: i.e., this type of claim appears in the theophanic experience of many prophets and even mystics;⁷⁶ (2) Its symbolic nature; and (3) Its function or significance, which is to represent authoritative communication from God.

⁷⁵ In a 19 October 1947 letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi stated, “Bahá'u'lláh is not the intermediary between other Manifestations and God. Each has His own relation to the Primal Source” (*Unfolding Destiny* 448).

⁷⁶ There are, according to Bahá'í teachings, important distinctions between the types of experiences had by prophets and those had by mystics. The point here is that the symbols or descriptions (and, in particular, accounts of voices) are similar. In some cases, the parallels are even more complex and striking. For example, the medieval German abbess, Hildegard (1098-1179) writes in a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, “In fact, in the texts of the Psalms, in the Gospel and other books which are shown to me in this vision, I understand the inner sense which touches my heart and soul like a burning flame, teaching me the depths of the explanation without, however, giving me literary mastery in the Teutonic language, of which I am deprived, for I can read only in a simple way, without being able to analyze the text”

The use of the expression “voice” is found throughout the Bible: Adam, for example “heard the voice of the Lord” (Gen. 3:8); when the dove is said to have descended upon Jesus, a voice was heard from out of heaven, or a cloud (Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22); Peter, James, and John are said to have heard a voice out of a cloud at the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:7); and during Jesus’ ministry, a voice is said to have spoken to him from out of heaven (John 12:28).

As with the use of such terminology in past scriptures, it is unlikely that Bahá’u’lláh intends such descriptions to be taken literally. The voice is a symbol of communication and in this type of context, an intermediary between the realm of God and the world of creation. With this in mind, it is perhaps worth considering a possible distinction between inspiration and revelation. Though the two can be viewed as one, inspiration is logically what is received or experienced, whereas revelation is what is revealed as a result of that inspiration. The “Voice” or “Word of God” is more reasonably a symbol of the inspiration, which is in itself indescribable and incommunicable. The prophet receives this inspiration and then communicates it through action, speech, or writing, at which point it becomes revelation, i.e., it becomes the “Word” (that is, a perceivable reality to the outward senses of others).

It does not appear possible to know whether Bahá’u’lláh literally heard a voice or specific words. Even if a voice or words were heard mentally, as is often the case in dreams or visions, it is impossible to imagine that such a voice could actually be attributed directly to God. Neither the voice nor word of God should be imagined in literal terms, for to do so would imply that God, the Inmost Reality, pronounced sounds or spoke in particular languages with particular accents and stylistic tendencies. This is no doubt one reason intermediaries such as angels or the Maiden are also incorporated into the symbolism to speak on behalf of God. Through the use of such symbolism, God’s transcendence over corporeal form is conveyed.

The actual words of the Manifestation assume their importance in their original form insofar as they are the authentic vehicle of inspiration and meaning. In the course of years, as a language evolves, the original pronunciations are lost, and gradually the meaning also becomes less clear. The words themselves as phonetic creations cannot be said to be essential, apart from the meanings they convey. As Bahá’u’lláh points out in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*:

in every age, the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man. (172)

The emphasis on meaning can also be seen in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation of the significance of the verse “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (John 1:1):

the Holy Spirit and the Word are the appearance of God. The Spirit and the Word mean the divine perfections that appeared in the Reality of Christ, and these perfections were with God; so the sun manifests all its glory in the mirror. (*Some Answered Questions* 206)

(cited in Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics* 19–20). Similarly, in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, Bahá’u’lláh writes, “Thou knowest full well that We perused not the books which men possess and We acquired not the learning current amongst them, and yet whenever We desire to quote the sayings of the learned and of the wise, presently there will appear before the face of thy Lord in the form of a tablet all that which hath appeared in the world and is revealed in the Holy Books and Scriptures. Thus do We set down in writing that which the eye perceiveth. Verily His knowledge encompasseth the earth and the heavens” (*Tablets* 149).

Here, the “Word” is equated with “divine perfections” rather than an esoteric phonetic or literary phenomenon. This suggests that the prophet may not be hearing literal words from God and then communicating these same words to us. The direct experience of the prophet is unknown, the descriptions being symbolic of an experience that represents a divine communication.

Dream-Vision

In theophanic passages translated by Shoghi Effendi, Bahá’u’lláh speaks of a “dream” rather than a “vision,” but it is likely that the two terms are used as synonyms.⁷⁷ Like the use of the term “voice,” which is used to symbolize or express divine communication, “vision” expresses the ability to see or perceive something. In such special religious contexts, both voices and visions represent forms and channels of divine communication. As with the “voice,” it appears Bahá’u’lláh is using this mode of communication purely in a metaphorical way. That is, people sometimes have visions or dreams which impart true guidance, and based on this fact, he uses the terminology in a metaphorical way to communicate the idea that he has received guidance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

there are two sorts of spiritual discoveries. One is the revelations of the Prophets, *and* the spiritual discoveries of the elect. The visions of the Prophets are not dreams; no, they are spiritual discoveries and have reality. They say, for example, “I saw a person in a certain form, and I said such a thing, and he gave such an answer.” This vision is in the world of wakefulness, and not in that of sleep. Nay, it is a spiritual discovery which is expressed as if it were the appearance of a vision. (Emphasis added. *Some Answered Questions* 251)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that spiritual discoveries are of two types: imaginary and real. The imaginary ones are like scientific theories that have no basis in reality and hence, no effect. Real spiritual discoveries have a basis in reality and thus, “produce wonderful effects” (*Some Answered Questions* 253).⁷⁸ These real discoveries, are often described or referred to in scripture as “visions.” However, while these visions refer to something real, they are not literal visions.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Shoghi Effendi uses the term “vision,” and in another reference he points out that a tablet, the title of which he translates as “Tablet of the Vision,” contains references to the Maid of Heaven who is said to personify the Most Great Spirit (*God Passes By* 221).

⁷⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation is striking in its rationalistic approach. He states that true scientific discoveries are “similar to revelation” (*Some Answered Questions* 252).

⁷⁹ In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation concerning visions, he speaks inclusively of “the revelations of the Prophets, *and* the spiritual discoveries of the elect” (*Some Answered Questions* 251, emphasis added)—an inclusiveness similar to *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:27. In a letter written on his behalf (Nov. 26, 1939), Shoghi Effendi states, “True visions, however, can be granted to those who are spiritually pure and receptive, and are not therefore confined to the Prophets” (see *Light of Guidance* 514). In another letter written on his behalf (Nov. 1, 1940), he states, “There is a fundamental difference between Divine Revelation as vouchsafed by God to His Prophets, and the spiritual experiences and visions which individuals may have. The latter should, under no circumstances, be construed as constituting an infallible source of guidance, even for the person experiencing them” (see *Lights of Guidance* 514). In the first letter it appears that Shoghi Effendi is referring to visions in a way that includes possibly both the figurative and the literal. Whereas in the second letter, it seems that he is making a distinction between the revelations of the prophets (which are figuratively referred to as visions) and the literal visions and dreams sometimes experienced by individuals.

The use of dreams to symbolize divine communication is also not unique in religious history. In biblical literature, dreams are often presented as channels of God's revelation: some examples of which include the King of Gerar ("God came to Abimelech in a dream," Gen. 20:3), Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12), Joseph's prophetic dream about his destiny (Gen. 37:5), the Magi being warned in a dream not to return to Herod (Matt. 2:12), and Pilate's wife (Matt. 27:19). In the Bible various Hebrew words suggesting a view or appearance are also translated with the term "vision." These words are used to indicate a mode of revelation, the first such example appearing in the story of Abraham: "the Lord came unto Abram in a vision" (Gen. 15: 1). Other examples appear in connection with Isaiah (2 Chron. 32:32, Isa. 1:1), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1, 8:4, 43), Daniel (Dan. 2:19), Obadiah (Obad. 1), Nahum (Nah. 1:1), Habakkuk (Hab. 2:2), and in the New Testament with St. Paul (Acts 16:9), and St. John (Rev. 9: 17).

In some instances, an angel is said to have appeared not in person, but in a dream: "the angel . . . appeareth to Joseph in a dream" (Matt. 2:13, also 1 :20). Scripture speaks of a "night vision" (*New English Bible*) or "vision of the night" (Dan. 2:19, King James Version; also Gen. 46:2), which suggests that a dream is intended. For similar dreams and visions in Bahá'í kerygma [proclamation of religious truth], see Nabíl-i-Azam, *The Dawn-Breakers*.⁸⁰

Dreams are, in fact, such a common means of divine communication that in the Torah, the Revelation of Moses is specifically classed as a theophany superior to that of the dreams received by other prophets. Stressing the superior station of Moses to other prophets "presumably his universal and independent Prophethood," God is reported to have "come down in a cloud" and said to Moses, Miriam, and Aaron collectively:

When a prophet⁸¹ of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house.⁸² With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. (Num. 12:6–8)

Here transcendent and anthropomorphic symbolism are fused to convey the supremacy of Moses' revelation to that of other prophets. As symbolism, the message is effectively conveyed, but taken literally, it is contradictory. The Bible itself denies that God has a face or form, or that God could

⁸⁰ There is the dream of Shaykh Ahmad concerning the Imám Hasan (1n); Siyyid Kázim's dream concerning Shaykh Ahmad (9–10n); the dream of the Arab who approached Siyyid Kázim (43); the vision of Mullá 'Alíy-i-Bastamí (68); the dream of 'Abdu'l-Vahháb concerning the appearance of the Imám 'Alí (87–88); the dream of the mujtahid Mirzá Muḥammad-Taqíy-i-Nurí concerning the promised One's house (111); the dream of Bahá'u'lláh's father (119); Mullá 'Abdu'l-Karím's vision of the Báb and the dream of the bird (165); Háji Mirzá Jání's dream of the Báb approaching Káshán (217); 'Alí Khán's vision of the Báb praying and his dream concerning Muḥammad's visit to Máh-Kú (247); the Indian dervish, Qahrú'lláh's, vision of the Báb calling him to Adhírbáyján (305); Anís's vision concerning his martyrdom with the Báb (307); Siyyid Ahmad's dream concerning his martyrdom and the martyrdom of his brother (405); Bahá'u'lláh's recounting of the mullá of Amul's dream concerning the promised One (461); and Bahá'u'lláh's recounting of 'Abdu'l-Vahháb's dream in the Síyáh-Chál (633).

⁸¹ Reference to the Hebrew offers no clarity to the distinction made in this passage between Moses and other prophets. The word *prophet* is here a translation of the Hebrew *nábi'*, the same term used to refer to Moses in other passages. The Hebrew scriptures use *ró'eh* for "seer."

⁸² The word *house* (from Hebrew *bayith*) signifies the family or nation of the Hebrews.

be seen.⁸³ This passage should, of course, be understood in its context; the distinction between Moses' revelation and that of other prophets does not refer to prophets such as Christ or Bahá'u'lláh, who originated new covenants and whole new eras in human history, but presumably to the type of lesser prophets described in the Hebrew scriptures, as well as seers, visionaries, and individuals who interpreted spiritual guidance from their literal dreams and visions.

The greatness of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation⁸⁴ indicates that his revelation cannot be adequately thought of in terms of merely a dream like that of the type of prophets intended in Numbers (12:6–8), and it appears that this is a point which 'Abdu'l-Bahá wishes to stress in *Some Answered Questions*. Commenting on Bahá'u'lláh's reference to a dream, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, provides this explanation:

We come to the explanation of the words of Bahá'u'lláh when He says: "O king! was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been." . . . This is the state of manifestation: it is not sensible; it is an intellectual reality, exempt and freed from time, from past, present and future; it is an explanation, a simile, a metaphor and is not to be accepted literally; it is not a state that can be comprehended by man. . . . Sleeping is the state of mystery; wakefulness is the state of manifestation. (*Some Answered Questions* 85, see also 155, 218).

This explanation concerning the phrase "I was . . . asleep" once more suggests that the dream to which Bahá'u'lláh refers is not a literal dream. It symbolizes the disclosure of God through his Manifestation, a phenomenon the exact nature of which "like that of Christ or any of the other Manifestations of God" is a mystery that must be understood and evaluated by the internal merits of what is actually revealed.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it is perhaps safe to conclude the following points:

- A continuity exists between Bahá'í theophanic symbolism and that of past scriptures. This use of the same symbols is intended to reenforce belief in the unity of redemptive purpose shared with the great past religious systems;
- The persistence of different types of anthropomorphic symbolism, that is, types which appear to be used to communicate accordingly the immanence or transcendence of God.

With regard to continuity, it is worth noting that a variety of symbols is also not a unique characteristic of any one theophany associated with one prophet. Typically, a number of different

⁸³ Some scholars, however, seeing the Bible as a composite work, believe that certain verses and anthropomorphic descriptions (particularly in Genesis) belong to an early period in Israelite history when God (Yahweh) was thought of as having a literal, human form. See, for example, Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* 70.

⁸⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá is recorded to have said, "the Messianic effulgence [of Jesus] was far greater than the Mosaic. The Sun of Reality, when it appeared from the dawning point of Christ, was as the midsummer sun in brilliancy and beauty" (*Promulgation* 274). Concerning the station of Bahá'u'lláh see, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 149–50, 160–61, 164–65; Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 107, 108.

symbols are used in association with each past theophany, such as that of Moses and Christ, and presumably to convey different meanings. In the case of Moses, for example, in addition to the Burning Bush, an angel is said to have appeared, and Moses is said to have heard a voice. In connection with the ministry of Jesus, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and a dove (a symbol of the mother goddess in ancient mythologies⁸⁵) is used as a metaphor for the Spirit of God (Matt. 3:16). The “Logos” in the prologue of John has also been understood as a parallel for Sophia (Wisdom) from the sapiential books. Bahá’u’lláh’s reference to “fire” (*Epistle* 22) recalls the Burning Bush (Exod. 3:2) and the descent of the holy Spirit upon the Apostles of Christ (Acts 2:3). In many cases, there is both variety of symbols and even the same symbols: a “voice,” an “overshadowing,” an “angel,” and so on.

When Shoghi Effendi mentions Bahá’u’lláh’s descriptions of his theophany, he repeatedly draws parallels to the theophanies of past supreme Manifestations, rather than arguing that it is entirely different in nature. He only stresses that the “circumstances”⁸⁶ in which Bahá’u’lláh “received the first intimations of His sublime mission” “surpass in poignancy” the “experience” of past supreme Manifestations (*God Passes By* 93). Otherwise, the emphasis is not on uniqueness but rather on redemptive continuity.

The recurring symbols remind us of a periodic and continuing process of revelation and divine activity. They alert us to the encounter between the Inmost Reality and creation, between the realm beyond time and space with the world of time and place. Through this awareness we are informed of our own potential to partake of this encounter and through sanctification restore the primal paradise.

The above instances of anthropomorphic symbols representing the person of God (rather than evidence of or digressions into so-called primitive religious thought) convey a picture of harmony and close communion with God; indeed, fellowship and friendship are suggested. This close communion with God is, as indicated throughout the ages by mystics and saints, attained through spiritual virtues and renunciation—obedience to the will of God, sanctification, humility, and love (e.g., Job 28:28, Pss. 17:15, 25:12, 27:8, 42:2, Dent. 29:29; Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 3–4, 191ff.). As in the Song of Songs, anthropomorphic symbolism can be understood as a way of stressing the immanence of the Beloved and the possible realization of the longings of the soul. When Bahá’u’lláh speaks as God, it is an assurance and affirmation of God’s continuing presence in the world through the virtues and teachings that he personified and which all believers can partake of and in which they can participate.

The use of other anthropomorphic symbols such as angels and maidens, on the one hand, and naturalistic symbols such as fire and clouds, on the other hand suggests the transcendence of Goel. Here a hierarchal reality is presented in which a Mediator discloses God’s will to a human being⁸⁷ who then manifests or reveals the will of God to the larger community of humankind. Beyond the mystery of the Manifestation is another mystery of disclosure and beyond that mystery is the ultimate Mystery of Mysteries. With this emphasis on transcendence, a profound impression of ultimacy is communicated and through this, the value and importance of the religious life.

⁸⁵ See Baring and Cashford, *Myth of the Goddess* 42, 357, 612.

⁸⁶ Presumably, the violent and tragic prison circumstances.

⁸⁷ In Bahá’í teachings, the prophets—or to use the more characteristic Bahá’í term “Manifestations of God”—have both a human and a divine nature. Bahá’u’lláh expounds this as the “twofold station” of the Manifestations of God (see *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 152ff., 176ff.). With regard to their ontology, they are said to have preexistent souls. In a 5 January 1948 letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi, for example, states, “The soul or spirit of the individual comes into being with the conception of his physical body. The Prophets, unlike us, are pre-existent. The Soul of Christ existed in the spiritual [world] before His birth in this world” (*Lights of Guidance* 504).

The above analysis also suggests how symbols shift between transcendence and immanence. With each new Revelation, the “Face of God” that can never be seen becomes symbolically the face of the Manifestation. The name of God that can never be heard or spoken becomes the name of the Manifestation.⁸⁸ Similarly, the Manifestation’s voice becomes the voice of God, and so on. In this way the presence of God becomes immanent through a form of actualization, but never incarnate literally. If it were to become literal in the world of phenomena, it would require the essence of God to become finite, and thus, as Shoghi Effendi points out, it would “cease immediately to be God” (*The World Order* 112).

Nevertheless, the Manifestations of God, like the mystics they inspired, appear to use such anthropomorphic symbols, often in a personalized way, to stress the immanence of divinity and the efficacy of the religious life. We can, therefore, not only see the various types of symbols but also surmise possible theological meanings from how they are used as metaphors.

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⁸⁸ Bahá’u’lláh stresses the Judaic unknowableness of God’s name, “I beseech Thee by Thy Name which no scroll can bear, which no heart can imagine and no tongue can utter—a Name which will remain concealed so long as hine own Essence is hidden, and will be glorified so long as Thine own Being is extolled—to unfurl, ere the present year draw to a close, the ensigns of Thine undisputed ascendancy and triumph” (*Prayers and Meditations* 94). However, in some passages, he appears to identify his own name “Bahá’u’lláh” with the Most Great Name, as affirmed by Shoghi Effendi (*Letters from the Guardian* 41). The special station of the name is also seen in the Gospel. Jesus invokes the name of God: “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one” (John 17: 11). The nature and character of God are also identified with Jesus through reference to God’s name: Jesus proclaims, “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world” (John 17:6, King James Version). St. Peter stresses to the Sanhedrin that “salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). St. Paul writes to the Philippians that through Christ’s death God “exalted him [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (Phil. 2:9–10, cf. Ps. 95:6, Isa. 45:23). Referring to Jesus, the Bab states that God bestowed “His favour upon the peoples of the world through the influence of Thy [Jesus’] Most Great Name” (*Selections* 64). Today, conservative commentators generally agree that by “the name . . . above every name” the “reference doubtless is to the office or rank conferred on Jesus-his glorious position, not his proper name (cf. Eph. 1:21; Heb. 1:4–5)” (see text note for Phil. 2:9, page 1805, *New International Version Study Bible*). In this age, from a Bahá’í point of view, the name above every other name is now associated with the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. In his writings the special significance of the name is apparent in hundreds of references, and this is yet another example of Bahá’u’lláh’s affirming an earlier symbolic expression, which can be found in the Book of Genesis narrative. Commenting on the verse, “It was then that people began to call on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26), Claus Westermann writes, “Worship is here spoken of as ‘calling on God’s name’. This means that by means of God’s name a genuine contact between humanity and God is effected. In fact, this is the basis of all forms of worship, as we still see in the Christian liturgy: ‘In the name of the Father . . .’” (*Genesis* 38).

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