



Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. By Nader Saiedi. 2nd edition. Paperback and e-book. Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2023. xxiv + 356 pages, including notes, references.

NADER SAIEDI'S *LOGOS AND CIVILIZATION* REVISITED

CHRISTOPHER BUCK

Author Nader Saiedi was the inaugural holder of the Taslimi Lectureship in Bahá'í History and Religion in Iran in the department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA. The second edition of Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization*, which includes some minor revisions due to authoritative translations that became available in the intervening years, invites a reappraisal of its noteworthy and significant contributions. Published reviews of the first edition of *Logos and*

Civilization were contributed by Seena Fazel and Dominic Parviz Brookshaw (2001), Denis MacEoin (2002), Stephen N. Lambden (2003), and Christopher Buck (2004). Retrospectively reviewing these previously published reviews, I have come to realize that academic reviewers tend to prioritize *critique* over *contribution*. That is to say, the great weight of a book's worth should be measured in terms of what original ideas and insights it brings to the current realm of discourse on a given topic. It is for this reason that I would like to prioritize contribution over critique, and offer readers a fresh perspective on the significant contributions that *Logos and Civilization* makes to current academic discourse on some of the most salient and celebrated sacred texts that form part and parcel of the legacy of Bahá'u'lláh's revelatory works.

AUTHOR'S OBJECTIVES

In the "Preface," author Nader Saiedi orients his readers with this clear, overarching objective: "*Logos and Civilization* is an attempt to demonstrate the unity and creativity of the message of Bahá'u'lláh through the analysis of a few works selected from the vast ocean of His writings" (*Logos* ix). By "creativity," Saiedi primarily appears to mean Bahá'u'lláh's originality in setting forth a "new paradigm" that constitutes a global worldview, replete with principles aimed at bringing about world peace and prosperity. This is seen in several of Saiedi's claims, such as:

it is the argument of this book that the writings of Bahá'u'lláh represent a conceptual break with those traditional assumptions. Bahá'u'lláh's vision, in other words, initiates a new paradigm, a new model, a new logic of discourse, a new episteme, and a new problematic—to use the terms used in various social theories and philosophies—in approaching reality. (*Logos* 26)

Beyond setting forth his argument for the originality and uniqueness of Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual and social principles in their own right, as *sui generis*, Saiedi goes on to claim: “Bahá'u'lláh uses the traditional language and categories of Eastern mystical and Islamic philosophical discourse to articulate a worldview that transcends the contemporary Eastern and Western modes of philosophy and social theory” (*Logos* 143).

While readers' opinions may differ on whether Saiedi succeeds in vindicating this sweeping claim at a general level, *Logos* is at its strongest when it uses analysis of a specific text or texts to support a more specific claim.

PROVISIONAL TRANSLATIONS

Interspersed throughout *Logos and Civilization*, Nader Saiedi offers over thirty of his own “provisional translations” of selected passages from Bahá'í sacred texts—translations which “were made possible through the indispensable assistance of the Research Department of the Bahá'í

World Centre” (ix).¹ Many of these translations serve to anchor Saiedi's analytical insights. For example, Saiedi translates an excerpt from a passage in which Bahá'u'lláh explains that His Revelation was addressed to “*mystics, then divines, and then kings*” (*Logos* 210–11) to persuasively argue for a three-stage framework of Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation.² A fuller translation of this passage, from a later work by Saiedi, reads:

Behold and observe! This is the finger of might by which the heaven of vain imaginings was indeed cleft asunder. Incline thine ear and hear! This is the voice of My pen which was raised among mystics, then divines, and then kings and rulers. (qtd. in Saiedi, “Replacing the Sword”)

PERSPECTIVES ON BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S LIFE AND PROPHETIC MINISTRY

Saiedi provides some fascinating details on the life of Bahá'u'lláh, such as

1 In Bahá'í parlance, an “authorized” translation of a passage of Bahá'í scripture is one which the Bahá'í World Centre has approved for publication and for devotions. All other translations—such as Saiedi's own, though produced with the assistance of the Research Department—are considered “provisional.”

2 For the original source, Saiedi cites the edition of Bahá'u'lláh's *Isbráqát* published in Tehran by Mu'assisiy-i-Milliy-i-Matbú'át-i-Amrí (*Logos* 340, note 319, and 348).

this autobiographical account written in a third-person narrative:

When this Wronged One was a child, He read in a book attributed to Mullá Báqir Majlisí . . . about the incident of the Banú-Qurayzah, whereupon He became so grieved and saddened that the Pen is unable to recount it, even though what occurred was the command of God and its sole purpose was to break the backs of the oppressors. . . .

But upon beholding the ocean of forgiveness and boundless mercy, He used to beseech the One True God, exalted be His glory, in those days to bring about whatsoever would be the cause of love, fellowship, and unity among all the peoples of the earth—until, suddenly, before sunrise (*qabl az ṭulúʿ*) on the second day of the month of His birth [i.e. before sunrise on His birthday], His entire condition and manner of expression and thinking were transformed in a transformation which proclaimed the joyful tidings of heavenly reunion. This experience occurred repeatedly for twelve consecutive days, after which the waves of the sea of utterance became manifest and the effulgences of the orb of assurance shone forth until it culminated in the advent of His Revelation.

Thus hast thou attained unto that which God hath made the source of joy to all mankind and the dawning-place of His tender

mercy to all who are in heaven and on earth. From that point forward, We removed through the agency of the Pen of the Most High whatever had been the cause of suffering, affliction, and discord, and set down with a fixed and irrevocable decree that which is the cause of unity and fellowship. (*Logos* 267)³

Here, Saiedi has located and situated Bahá'u'lláh's resolve to "bring about whatsoever would be the cause of love, fellowship, and unity among all the peoples of the earth" at a young age, sometime during His childhood. He also highlights resonances between the different moments in Bahá'u'lláh's life—including this little-known episode from His childhood—that seem to have particular significance in the progressive unfolding of His revelatory mission. He notes, for instance, that "the night before Bahá'u'lláh's birthday in 1852 was most likely the beginning of the year nine" alluded to by the Báb for the appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest, and that therefore the "date of the Síyáh-Chál experience coincides with the date of the childhood experience." Similarly, "the Riḍván declaration, like the childhood experience, also lasted for twelve days" (*Logos* 268). If true, then this is yet another noteworthy contribution that Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* has made.

3 Bahá'u'lláh, provisional translation by Nader Saiedi. See p. 343, notes 380 and 382 ("In Mázandarání, *Asráru'l-Áthár* 2:17–18.").

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S REVELATION AS A
"REVOLUTIONIZING" APPROACH

Saiedi provides an original analysis of several of Bahá'u'lláh's key works, such as: "The Four Valleys" (*Chahár Vádí*), "The Seven Valleys" (*Haft Vádí*), and "Gems of Divine Mysteries" (*Javáhiru'l-Asrár*) in Chapter 3; "The Book of Certitude" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*) in Chapters 4 and 5; the "Wondrous New Book" (*Kitáb-i-Badí'*) in Chapter 6; and "The Most Holy Book" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*) in Chapters 7 and 8. A key term—indeed, a dynamic concept—in Saiedi's approach is characterizing Bahá'u'lláh's thought and discourse as revolutionary: "A major thesis of this book is the creative, revolutionary, and unprecedented character of Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual and social vision" (*Logos* xvii). Here is one instance of Saiedi's analysis of one of Bahá'u'lláh's major works as a "conceptual revolution":

Gems of Divine Mysteries, rather than being an inconsistent text, is the key for understanding Bahá'u'lláh's conceptual revolution in mystical discourse. The subject of the Seven Valleys is the spiritual journey and its stages. The subject of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is progressive revelation and historical consciousness. In *Gems of Divine Mysteries* these two subjects constitute an organic unity. As I have suggested, it is the interpenetration and the unity of both subjects—historical consciousness

and spiritual journey—which distinguishes Bahá'u'lláh's mystical approach from traditional approaches. The traditional Sufi approach conceived of the spiritual journey as a flight from the realm of plurality, change, and history. It is precisely this problematic that Bahá'u'lláh has changed. Because the unknowable Essence of God in its invisibility and transcendence is absolutely inaccessible to human experience, the only way that human beings can approach and experience God is through the experience of the reflection and manifestation of God in the mirrors of the visible realm—the historically specific Manifestations of God. History, therefore, instead of being an obstacle to mystical experience, becomes the only way human beings can approach divine Reality. In this way history is spiritualized and spirit is historicized. (*Logos* 45–46)

In this sense, Saiedi has revolutionized our understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's approach to mysticism.

In a much similar approach, Chapter 4, "The *Kitáb-i-Íqán*: Context and Order," opens by positing that "Bahá'u'lláh expounds a revolutionary new perspective":

The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude) is one of the most significant works of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation. In this text, Bahá'u'lláh expounds a revolutionary new

perspective on theology, hermeneutics, spiritual journey, epistemology, eschatology, and the relation of society and religion. Its central issue, the doctrine of progressive revelation, is the basis of Bahá'í metaphysics and theology; but much more than that, it provides new approaches to various questions of epistemology, sociology, political theory, and ethics. (*Logos* 91)

As a continuation of Saeidi's theme of Bahá'u'lláh's "revolutionary new perspective," Chapter 5 is entitled, "The Kitáb-i-Íqán: Theology Revolutionized":

In the first part of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh discusses the conditions of the possibility of spiritual knowledge. [...]

Bahá'u'lláh's concept of progressive revelation, discussed in the second part of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, not only applies the concept of historicity to the realm of human truth and cultural dynamics but also to the realm of religious truth and divine revelation. In doing so, Bahá'u'lláh goes beyond nineteenth-century notions of historicity and transcends the limitations of the major models of historical reason such as those of Hegel, Marx, and Dilthey. (*Logos* 113)

Here, perhaps an equally apt title for Chapter 5 would be "The Kitáb-i-Íqán:

Philosophy Revolutionized" (emphasis added).

Chapter 6 ("The Kitáb-i-Badí': The Promise Fulfilled") is an informative discourse on "The Wondrous New Book" which is "one of Bahá'u'lláh's most important writings" and which "should be considered His main apologia" (*Logos* 149).⁴ In Chapter 7 ("The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Date and Constitutive Principles"), "four constitutive principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas" are set forth as a "a kind of mysterious code of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation" (212) serving as a heuristic key to organizing principles found throughout Bahá'u'lláh's major works. As summarized in Chapter 8 ("From the Order of the Book to the New Order"), these "four principles that give global thematic structure and coherence to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas" are: "(1) the removal of the sword, (2) the principle of covenant, (3) the universal revelation, and (4) the principle of heart" (227). On page 211, a chart is presented in which the "chronology of the stages of Bahá'u'lláh's writings" are correlated with "the three metaphysical principles of unity" (i.e. the "Unity of God," the "Unity of Manifestations" and the "Unity of humanity") which, in turn, are brought into further correspondence with the terms "New," "World," "Order," and "the thematic order of the Aqdas." This schematic represents—and is highly illustrative of—Nader Saiedi's quest for "Order

4 The Kitáb-i-Badí' is reputed to be Bahá'u'lláh's lengthiest work.

in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh" (as indicated in the last part of the book's subtitle). Thus, *Logos and Civilization* reads like a commentary on this key statement, which Saiedi quotes twice:

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed. (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Saiedi, *Logos* 257, 264)

Both quotations of this passage of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (§ 181) occur in Chapter 8 ("From the Order of the Book to the New Order"), as if for emphasis.⁵

Chapters 9 and 10 ("Philosophical Premises of the New World Order" and "Spirit, History, and Order" respectively) follow, to end the book, and are, for the most part, critiques (primarily criticisms) of Juan R. I. Cole's *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Bahá'í Faith in the Nineteenth-century Middle East*. Space does not permit a commentary here.

In sum, Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* is a highly original, well-organized and skillfully argued treatise on Bahá'u'lláh's writings—and, as outlined earlier, is a significant

methodological, philological, and conceptual contribution to Bahá'í studies. Although at times somewhat jargonistic (with respect to academic (especially Kantian) wording that may be unfamiliar to nonspecialist readers, such as "Part II: The Critique of Spiritual and Historical Reason") and, in places, polemical (especially in Saiedi's extended critiques of Cole's works), and strangely oblivious, if not critically dismissive, of relevant prior scholarship (as previous reviewers have noted), *Logos and Civilization* is brilliantly conceived, organized, and executed in terms of its insightful exposition of selected exemplars of Bahá'u'lláh's major writings, which Bahá'ís regard and revere as sacred texts, revealed for this day and age. *Logos and Civilization* is highly recommended to prospective readers interested in a more in-depth, insightful analysis of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Recommended for university libraries as well, since Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* is a major contribution to Bahá'í studies.

5 Throughout Chapter 8, Saiedi references what are usually referred to as "Paragraphs" of the *Aqdas* as "Verses" (*passim*).

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