

THE PROPHECIES OF JESUS**Author:** Michael Sours**Published by:** Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1991, 223 pages

Bahá'í literature on Christianity is, by and large, apologetic. Recent exceptions prove the rule: Michael Sours's article, "The Maid of Heaven, the Image of Sophia, and the Logos" (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4.1 [1991]: 47–65) is a nonapologetic exercise in comparative phenomenology. For this essay, Sours was distinguished with the 1991 Association for Bahá'í Studies Award for Excellence in the general category. *The Prophecies of Jesus* emanates from the same pen, and despite its drawbacks, it is excellent apology and is, in the words of another reviewer commenting on the apology–scholarship distinction, "therefore apologetics, polemics, but not objective scholarship. And let it at once be added that it is none the worse for that."¹

The present review, in keeping with its publication in an academic journal, will press the distinction between apologetics and scholarship, too often blurred in Bahá'í literature. Like the word *logical* in colloquial usage, the term "Bahá'í scholar" has a rather wide and imprecise usage in the Bahá'í community.

In its promotion of *The Prophecies of Jesus*, the 1992–93 Oneworld Catalogue cites the Bahá'í Review Committee of the United Kingdom's evaluation: "An interesting book from an author who is rapidly establishing himself as the Bahá'ís' foremost Christian scholar." This is a fair assessment of Sours's output as a Bahá'í author on the topic of Christianity. The designation of Sours as a scholar, however, requires some explanation.

A rather broad use of the terms "scholar" and "scholarship" in Bahá'í literature may perhaps be traced to a received interpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's benediction upon "the learned ones (*'ulamá'*) in Bahá'" in his code of laws.² The "learned" are defined in two distinct ways, institutionally and individually: (1) the Institution of "the Learned," which constitutes the appointed branch of the Bahá'í Administrative Order (Hands of the Cause of God and Counsellors, Auxiliary Board Members and their assistants); and (2) Bahá'ís who are preeminent in teaching and proclamation.³ In contemporary Bahá'í

1. See L. P. Elwell-Sutton, review of *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith* by H. M. Balyuzi, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1972): 70.

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) 82.

3. The relevant annotation in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (245–46) does not cite a specific interpretation of the Aqdas verse itself, but of a similar passage in the Book of the Covenant (*Kitáb-i-'Ahd*). One available reference in Persian to the Aqdas verse is to be found in R. Qadímí, *Golzár-i-Ta'álím-Bahá'í* (Hofheim-Langenhain, Germany: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1985) 8. Here Shoghi Effendi states, in Persian, that the "learned" are: *dar yik maqám ayádí-yi-amru'lláh va dar maqám-i-dígar muballighín va náshirín-i-amr* ("in

communities, there is a clear emphasis on the institutional dimension. The International Teaching Centre, in a letter dated 22 March 1981, speaks of the relationship that ideally should exist between the Institution of the Learned and the community of Bahá'í scholars: "The Supreme Body [the Universal House of Justice] has informed us that both the International Teaching Centre and the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in the field of Bahá'í scholarship by encouraging budding scholars, and also by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others." Here, "scholars" seems to have a professional connotation. However, in common Bahá'í parlance, a "Bahá'í scholar" is not presumed an academic.⁴

Presentationally, *The Prophecies of Jesus* is scholarly in respect of research and documentation, without being a work of scholarship. As I read it, Sours prosecutes, albeit with kid gloves, an oblique polemic against Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as will be shown below. Sours speaks softly, but carries a big stick. Christian readers will read seventy pages (pp. 31–101) of exegesis under the overarching theme of corruption: corruption of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Significant is the fact that *The Prophecies of Jesus* is written in the form of a biblical commentary, namely, on Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) known also as the Synoptic Apocalypse (paralleled by Mark 13 and Luke 21). This choice of form was deliberate, showing sensitivity on the author's part to Christian sensibilities and to the Christian expository tradition. Verses are indicated in the running headers. A random glance at the upper right-hand corner of page 127, for instance, tells the reader that Matt. 24:30 is being discussed.

Following the introduction, *The Prophecies of Jesus* is divided into four parts: I. The Beginning of Sorrows (thematically governed by the corruption of Judaism and Christianity); II. The Corrupting of Islam; III. The Second Advent; IV. The Command to Watch. An epilogue and seven appendices follow.

A cursory look at the bibliography discloses an impressive command of popular expository literature, particularly of the kind of Gospel commentary a Christian might find in the reference section of a public library. Sours is particularly well read in the nineteenth-century millennialist literature, from which he ably documents the messianic fervor of the period. Visibly absent from the bibliography are works of critical scholarship.

Sours's apologetic intent is stated thus: "In this book an attempt will be made to provide information which will enable those who accept the authority of the Bible, or those who are interested in the Bahá'í Faith, to understand why many have acknowledged Bahá'u'lláh's biblical claims" (18). He has little use

one station, the Hands of the Cause of God; in another station, teachers (*muballighín*) and diffusers (*náshirín*) of the Cause." I see no reason why this interpretation should rule out Bahá'í academics.

4. Cf. W. S. Hatcher's typology in "Scholarship: A Bahá'í Perspective," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 1.2 (1988): 38.

for other possible approaches to Jesus' Olivet Discourse. Contemporary–historical interpretation⁵ of Matthew 24 does not serve Sours's apologetic interests;⁶ neither does theoretical consideration of the "community of Matthew," for whom the gospel was first intended. The author shows no *methodological* interest in sociological interpretation of the New Testament, which serves to constrain interpretation.

Bahá'í readers might still wonder why *The Prophecies of Jesus* is not, strictly speaking, a work of scholarship. The answer is simple: A key element of apologetics is polemic. Scholarship is presumed free of polemics. Though the polemical tone is subdued, *The Prophecies of Jesus* carries an antiestablishmentarian polemic of world–historical proportions.

Part I, entitled "The Beginning of Sorrows," is really the beginning of a Christian-styled Bahá'í polemic in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in prophetic terms, are each given institutional obituaries. The destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and the dispersion of the Jewish people following the Second Revolt in AD 120 are presented as a consequence of the Jews' rejection of Jesus. Are the Romans then exonerated as instruments of God's wrath? By implication, Sours sees the consequences of Gentile rejection of Christ as somehow mitigated in the conversion of Constantine some 300 years later (31–39).

This anti-Judaic (not anti-Semitic) line of argumentation is perhaps more Christian than Bahá'í.⁷ Sours does not address the history of Christian anti-Semitism, for which the theme of rejection and deicide ("God-killing") was a pretext, culminating in the Holocaust (to which Sours alludes on p. 36), for which the Jews were obviously not responsible. (Here, Bahá'u'lláh's own concern for the rights of oppressed Jews in nineteenth-century Europe could have been deemed relevant.)⁸ Sours's argument is lent a further inconsistency in that Christians did

5. An approach flatly rejected by Bahá'í apologist Ruth Moffett, *New Keys to the Book of Revelation* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1977) xiv–xv.

6. Sours acknowledges that contemporary–historical exegesis of Matt. 24:16–18 (as referring to the first Jewish Revolt) has achieved a near consensus, but rejects this interpretation on theological grounds (p. 90). Sours puts himself in such a position that he has to overrule an element of early Christian self-understanding, as in the case of the Pella tradition current in second- and third-century Ebionite Christianity.

7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historical analysis of the fate of the Jews is more consistent. The events that led to the destruction of both the First Temple and the Second Temple are attributed, in part, to the disastrous consequences of corrupt leadership (*The Secret of Divine Civilization* [tr. Marzieh Gail, 3d ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975] 75–80).

8. In his Tablet known as *Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd*, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "At present the light of reconciliation is dimmed in most countries and its radiance extinguished while the fire of strife and disorder hath been kindled and is blazing fiercely. Two great powers who regard themselves as the founders and leaders of civilization and the framers of constitutions have risen up against the followers of the Faith associated with Him Who

not suffer the same fate for their rejection of the Prophet Muḥammad.⁹

Throughout the rest of Part I, the reader is shown, among other things, visions of “False Christs,” “Catastrophes,” “Persecution of the Christians,” “Apostasy and Betrayal Among Christians,” “False Prophets Among the Christians”—in a word, a portrayal of Christianity in decline. Jesus is represented, in effect, as a prophet of doom for his own religion. Indeed, the final section of Part I is entitled, “The End of the Christian Era” (59–60), but such an “End” is not made explicit at this juncture. The reader will soon figure out that Christianity somehow “ended” twice: dispensationally, with the advent of Muḥammad in AD 622 (82) and prophetically, in AD 1844 when the dispensation of Islam came to an end and the return of Christ as foretold by Daniel took place. Bahá'í doctrine is explicit as to the eclipse of Christ's authority by Muḥammad,¹⁰ in the sense that each “New Testament” both confirms former scriptural authority yet renders it obsolete (“Old”). Retained in Bahá'í universalism is the sense that each of the world religions has a continuing, indispensable part to play in the spiritual metamorphosis of the world.¹¹

conversed with God [Moses]. Be ye warned, O men of understanding. It ill beseemeth the station of man to commit tyranny; rather it behoveth him to observe equity and be attired with the raiment of justice under all conditions” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 170). By implication, the local moral authority of Christianity is seen as vitiated and Jews acknowledged as victims, not perpetrators. Bahá'u'lláh, as a general principle, upheld “the equal rights of all denominations” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveller's Narrative* [tr. E. G. Browne, rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980] 88).

9. Again, the explanation of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is more enlightened: “A careful and thorough investigation of the historical record will establish the fact that the major part of the civilization of Europe is derived from Islam” (*Secret of Divine Civilization* 89).

10. Bahá'í salvation history, termed Progressive Revelation, is dispensational: “The Christian Dispensation must, therefore,” wrote Shoghi Effendi, “end in 622 A.D. and from that date till 1844 is the era of Muḥammad . . .” (*The Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'í Community of the British Isles* [London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981] 432).

11. This aspect of Bahá'í worldview, though not a salient motif, is expressed by Shoghi Effendi with Gibbonesque economy: “The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. . . . Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind” (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* [rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974] 57–58). This passage represents Christianity as a faith with its moral viability intact.

Matthew 24:15 is taken as “a specific reference to what befell Islam—that is, Islam *is the holy Temple that was desecrated*” (82). Sours takes Christians to task for their rejection of Islam (although Muḥammad is never represented as the return of Christ) but somewhat exonerates them for this failing owing to the corruption of Islam at the hands of its own leaders (87). This paradox—the corruption of Christianity that precipitated a new Revelation from God, which in turn was corrupted—obliges Sours to prolong the time of Christian tribulation for 1,260 years (96).

Part II (“The Corrupting of Islam”) treats at some length time-prophecies in the Book of Daniel, to which Jesus refers (Matt. 24:15). Various chronological periods foretold in the ninth chapter of Daniel are interpreted in detail. Sours has no direct interest in the patristic tradition within the history of exegesis: the reader would not know that it was chronographer Julius Africanus who first drew Christian attention to the seventy weeks of years in Dan. 9:24–25 as a precise vaticination and proof of Christ’s first advent. Occasionally, however, we get patristic information secondhand: Sours cites Calvin’s reference to Jerome (73).

Patristic tradition had the advantage of hindsight only when it came to Christ’s first advent; the Parousia was a different matter altogether. Sours does an impressive job in surveying modern Christian messianic speculation, which justifies his observation: “‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own statements affirm the methods of calculation used by Christian commentators, but He differs in that He explains that the prophetic period of time refers to the time span from Muḥammad to the Báb . . .” (80). So far, Sours has made a strong case for the eschatological significance of the year 1844 from the vantage of Christian chiliasm: For Bahá’ís, the advent of Bahá’u’lláh’s prophetic herald, the Báb, is seen as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Strangely, after all the calculations are performed, the Báb is never mentioned as the signal adventist event of 1844, presumably because Christians would be confused by the advent of two independent Manifestations of God.

Sours also states that “Christian scholars were right in realizing that Christianity was being corrupted and that the period of 1,260 years must, therefore, have begun around the time its corruption began” (83–84). Here we jump from corrupt Christianity to corrupt Islam. Apologetic here has taken on implicit invective.

Arguments from Christian prophecy are problematic enough; when Islam is factored in, the task of apologetics becomes even more complex. For instance, in one of the earliest recorded “firesides” in Bahá’í history (Yazd, 7 May 1888), the Bahá’í poet ‘Andalíb tried to persuade Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne, on the basis of the Parable of the Vineyard, that Bahá’u’lláh was the Lord of the Vineyard (Mark 12:9). By force of argument, the scholar Browne claims to have obliged the poet ‘Andalíb to admit Muḥammad’s subordinate status to Jesus Christ, a position clearly counter to Bahá’í doctrine.¹²

12. E. G. Browne, *A Year Amongst the Persians* (London: Century, 1984 [1893]) 434.

In Part II, Sours relies on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy-fulfillment discourses in *Some Answered Questions*, outlining watersheds in Bahá'í salvation-history. Throughout Part III ("The Second Advent"), the author draws liberally from Bahá'u'lláh's *Book of Certitude*, considered the most important doctrinal work of the Bahá'í Faith. Typologically, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's more linear, particularizing prophecy-fulfillment approach and Bahá'u'lláh's archetypal, cyclical stance are complementary; Sours uses both. In Part IV ("The Command to Watch"), the author balances archetypal and historicizing approaches.

The Epilogue takes note of historical accounts of Bahá'í origins by Christian missionaries. The reader now comes full circle, from the author's discussion of Christian messianic expectations in the introduction to the contemporary witness by Christian missionaries of Bahá'í-proclaimed messianic fulfillment.

Appendix I, "Meaning and Metaphor," draws an analogy between the Gospels and Nabíl's *The Dawnbreakers*. Sours argues that Nabíl's account of the fierce gale in Shíráz following the martyrdom of the Báb on July 9, 1850, may be a symbolic embellishment on the part of the Bahá'í historian. Like the ominous darkness of Matt. 27:45, allegory and event are seen as necessary complements. For Sours, facticity is "insufficient" and "symbols are used to convey spiritual facts which otherwise would not be evident in the mere description of the event" (168). In offering this critical analysis, Sours does not acknowledge an intellectual debt to Bahá'í academic Stephen Lambden, who first drew formal attention to the hagiographic elements in Nabíl's history.¹³

Appendix II is a useful historical overview of Christian chiliasm. The remaining appendices are of topical interest as well. Reference to Ephraim the Syrian's symbolic interpretation of the Star of the Nativity as an allusion to John the Baptist (197–98) affords an interesting patristic complement to Bahá'u'lláh's *The Book of Certitude*.

The Prophecies of Jesus is a handsome volume, richly illustrated. It has an almost coffee-table-book appeal. While not a work of scholarship, it is scholarly in its quest for documentation. Though not a critical exegesis of the Little Apocalypse, Sours's book is the finest document of Bahá'í-Christian apologetics to date due, among other reasons, to the author's sensitivity to Christian sensibilities. While *The Prophecies of Jesus* is not the subject of scholarship, it may be the object of it in future efforts to objectify the apologetic dimension of Bahá'í worldview.

Sours's strongest argument is Christian rather than Bahá'í. By dwelling so heavily on the chiliastic fervor that swept through Christianity in the West during the nineteenth century, Sours makes a strong historical case for *Christian* openness to religious renewal. Yet, despite its warmth of format and tone, *The*

13. S. Lambden, "An Episode in the Childhood of the Báb," in *In Iran. Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, 3 (ed. P. Smith, Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1986) 1–31.

Prophecies of Jesus is perhaps antithetical to the author's other major concern, expressed by the title of his series, *Preparing for a Bahá'í/Christian Dialogue*. Will the interests of such dialogue be served by yet another Bahá'í apology that seeks to legitimize Bahá'í claims through a conceptually inconsistent and unkind denigration of Christianity itself? *The Prophecies of Jesus* apologetically succeeds in establishing the nineteenth century as a time ripe for renewal, cast in terms of prophetic fulfillment. But for the rest of the argument to work, Sours consigns Christianity, as a dispensation, to obsolescence.

This linear line of argumentation is perhaps too narrow an exposition of the Bahá'í doctrine of Progressive Revelation, part and parcel of which is the concept of the "Major Plan of God,"¹⁴ in which the entire world at large is seen as undergoing a transformation in the course of its social evolution, wherein Christianity itself, presumably, is a major player. Christian fundamentalism may be viewed as a retardant in this process, but progressive elements throughout the Christian world may be seen as serving humanity in ways in which the Bahá'í community is resourcefully incapable of at present. The Second Glad-Tiding,¹⁵ the Second *Ṭaráz*¹⁶ and the Fourth Candle of Unity¹⁷—Bahá'í principles of religious fraternalism¹⁸ and cooperation¹⁹—should, ideally, mollify the tone of

14. The Universal House of Justice, based on the writings of Shoghi Effendi, states that "two great processes are at work in the world: [the first is] the great Plan of God, tumultuous in its progress, working through mankind as a whole, tearing down barriers to world unity and forging humankind into a unified body in the fires of suffering and experience. This process will produce, in God's due time, the Lesser Peace. . . . The working out of God's Major Plan proceeds mysteriously in ways directed by Him alone, but the Minor Plan which He has given us to execute, as part of His grand design for the redemption of mankind, is clearly delineated" (*Wellspring of Guidance* 133, 134).

15. "The second Glad-Tidings: . . . Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. Thus hath the day-star of His sanction and authority shone forth above the horizon of the decree of God, the Lord of the Worlds" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 22). Elsewhere I have argued that this teaching represents the positive action-oriented dimension of Bahá'u'lláh's first act of legislation upon his Declaration in 1863, when he abrogated holy war. The pairing of these two laws is reflected later in his Tablet of Glad-Tidings, one of the most programmatic expositions of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. See C. Buck, "The Fourth Candle: The Unity of Religion and Interfaith Dialogue," *Dialogue* 1:2 (Spring 1986): 9–11.

16. "The second *Ṭaráz* [Ornament] is to consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 35). Bahá'u'lláh also registers this code of conduct as an injunction in his law code, the Most Holy Book.

17. "The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself [world unity], and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendor" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited by Shoghi Effendi in *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 39).

18. Or "peace among the religions," as 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifies in *Star of the West* 4:254.

19. "Our hope is that the world's religious leaders and the rulers thereof will unitedly arise for the reformation of this age and the rehabilitation of its fortunes" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 168).

future Bahá'í apologetics, in the present writer's opinion.

The Prophecies of Jesus presents a sustained argument for the plausibility of fulfillment. A description of the nature of that fulfillment itself is entirely lacking, save for a brief mention of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on page 162. The author dwells at length on the putative corruption of Christianity and Islam but fails to present a case for the fulfillment itself in positive terms.

In this respect, there is no attraction for the Christian reader. Furthermore, the author develops no real sense of the *thematic* progressiveness of revelation; Christianity simply went corrupt, and so did Islam. *The Prophecies of Jesus* deals extensively with time, corruption, and some symbolism. Though possibly convinced that a valid case for fulfillment can now be made, the reader is still left uninformed about the actual prophecy fulfillment itself.

This is the failing of Bahá'í apologetics generally: that criticism is not sufficiently counterbalanced by construction. Indeed, criticism may function in a compensatory way for an unevolved capacity to present, in positive Christian terms, why the coming of Bahá'u'lláh represents a real fulfillment of Christian aspirations. In the meantime, the Bahá'í readers, for whom *The Prophecies of Jesus* seems more directed, will find themselves more skilled in polemic rather than in proclamation.

The present reviewer has every confidence that Michael Sours can relate the utopian elements in Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature to the Bahá'í reformist agenda.²⁰ Now that he has made his case for the *possibility* of the fulfillment of the prophecies of Jesus, his readership awaits the roundtable of formal dialogue, in which Christians and Bahá'ís can, with parity, mutually construct a social agenda.

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20. Thus fulfilling a Bahá'í mandate: "What the Faith needs, *even more than teachers*, is books that expound the true significance of its principles in light of modern thought and social problems" (emphasis added; Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 6 May 1933, *Unfolding Destiny* 431).