

# ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary on the Islamic tradition: ‘God doth give victory to this religion by means of a wicked man’ – a provisional translation and notes

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## Introduction

This paper presents a provisional translation of a short exegesis (*tafsīr*) by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Ottoman Turkish.<sup>1</sup> There are many tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in various Turkic dialects.<sup>2</sup> The original text of this tablet appears in a collection of Turkish tablets and prayers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Majmū‘ih-yi Alwāh wa Munājāthā-yi Turkī* in the Arabic-Persian script, first published in 1948–9.<sup>3</sup> It is probable that this tablet was written in ‘Akka since at least one tablet in this collection is dated 1894, and at that time ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was living there. He moved to Haifa after his liberation in 1908. As in the case of some other tablets, it was probably addressed to a Sunni Ottoman official<sup>4</sup> or a cleric. Its content indicates that the recipient was not a Bahá’í because it does not contain the typical openings emphasizing a believer’s qualities, nor the common exhortations to servitude before God and promoting the Bahá’í Faith. The recipient is addressed as ‘thine excellency’, and this tablet forms part of what can be called the ‘external affairs’ work that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá carried out for Bahá’u’llah. In the second part of this tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá interprets a dream of the addressee; this, however, is discussed in another paper as it is a different topic.<sup>5</sup>

The *ḥadīth* (tradition) in question is from *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, which is regarded by Sunni Muslims as the most reliable of the compilations of Islamic traditions. The text of the relevant *ḥadīth* may be translated thus:

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- 1 I would like to thank Moojan Momen, Todd Lawson, William McCants, Vahid Brown and Ismael Velasco; without their very useful comments and references this article would not have developed.
  - 2 The Bahá’í World Centre has a large collection of such tablets; Dr. Iraj Ayman (personal communication).
  - 3 It consists of mostly short tablets in Ottoman and Azeri Turkish to individuals and Bahá’í communities in Iran and Caucasia (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) and prayers; Tehran: Mu’assasah-i Millī-yi Maṭbū‘āt-i Amrī, BE 127/1970–1; the text of this edition is used in this paper. Compare the same tablets and prayers in a publication with no title by Lajnih-yi Nashr-i Āthār-i Amrī, Tehran, BE 105/1327 Shamsī (1948–9). The latter is the first edition printed in type letters; it has some minor printing errors but contains a short Arabic tablet which does not appear in the second edition. I am not aware of other editions.
  - 4 See, for example, Moojan Momen, ‘‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a Hidden Treasure ...”’, *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin* 3: 4 (December 1985), 4–35, and at <http://www.northhill.demon.co.uk/relstud/>. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed this tablet when in his teens to a certain Ali Shevket Pasha; *idem*. ‘‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Commentary on the Qur’anic Verses Concerning the Overthrow of the Byzantines: The Stages of the Soul’’, *Lights of ‘Irfān*, Papers presented at the ‘Irfān Colloquia and Seminars, vol. 2, Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund, 2001, pp. 99–117; Necati Alkan, ‘‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Turkish Commentary of the Sura of the Fig: Introduction and Provisional Translation’’, *Bahá’í Studies Review* 10 (2001), 115–29; that article gives a short overview of Turkish Bahá’í studies.
  - 5 ‘Of Camels, Sheep and the Prophet Muhammad: A Dream Interpretation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’’, presented at the 48th ‘Irfān Colloquium (Acuto, Italy), 10–13 July 2003.

**Narrated by Abu Huraira:**

We witnessed along with God's Apostle the Khaibar (campaign). God's Apostle told his Companions about a man who claimed to be a Muslim, 'This man is one of the people destined for [Hell-]Fire.' When the battle started, the man fought very bravely and received a great number of wounds and became crippled. Upon that, a man from among the Companions of the Prophet came and said, 'O God's Apostle! Do you know what the man you described as one of the people of [Hell-]Fire has done? He has fought very bravely for God's Cause and he has received many wounds.' The Prophet said, 'But he is indeed one of the people destined for [Hell-]Fire.' Some of the Muslims were in doubt about this statement. So while the man was in that state, the pain caused by the wounds troubled him so much that he put his hand into his quiver and took out an arrow and committed suicide with it. Some men from among the Muslims went to the Apostle of God and said, 'O Apostle of God! God has made your statement true. So-and-so has committed suicide (suicide being in breach of Islamic Law).' The Apostle of God said, 'O Bilal! Get up and announce in public: None will enter Paradise but a believer, but God doth give victory to this religion (Islam) by means of a wicked man.'<sup>6</sup>

In his commentary on this *ḥadīth*, 'Abdu'l-Baha seems to ignore its negative context – the fact that the Prophet Muhammad referred to this person, though fighting alongside the Muslims, as one of the people of hell-fire (i.e. a person destined for hell) – and puts forth a more positive interpretation of the words '*Inna'llāha yu'ayyidu ḥādḥā'd-dīn bi-rajulin fājirin*' – 'God doth give victory to this religion by means of a wicked man'. 'Abdu'l-Baha's *tafsīr* here is in the Islamic tradition of giving the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) of the words. Thus, for example the famous mystic 'Mawlānā' Jalālu'd-Dīn-i Rūmī states:

Know the words of the Koran are simple, but within the outward sense is an inner secret one. Beneath that secret meaning is a third, whereat the highest wit is dumbfounded. The fourth meaning has been seen by none save God, the Incomparable and All-Sufficient. Thus they go on, even to seven meanings, one by one, according to the saying of the Prophet, without doubt. Do thou, O son, confine not thy view to the outward meaning, even as the demons saw in Adam only clay. The outward meaning of the Koran is like Adam's body, for its semblance is visible, but its soul is hidden.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, it may seem puzzling that 'Abdu'l-Baha is taking, not a doubtful, but what is regarded as an authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) *ḥadīth* from no less a source than al-Bukhārī and he is not questioning its authenticity, just giving it a completely new and unexpected meaning. He is making the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) have the opposite of the manifest meaning (*ẓāhir*). However, 'Abdu'l-Baha's interpretation is not unusual in terms of the tradition of Sufi interpretation of *ḥadīth*, even *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth*. 'Abdu'l-Baha often used the mystics' approach when interpreting *ahādīth* or Qur'anic verses. An example of this is his commentary on the beginning of the Sura of Rome (sura 30).<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis on 'enjoining the good and forbidding evil' is an element that this commentary shares with a lot of Islamic literature. However, even notoriously wicked figures like the Pharaoh or even Satan can in Sufi interpretations be seen as the only true worshippers of God in mystical

6 *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, vol. 8, book 77, no. 603 at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah>; Islamic Server of MSA-USC, accessed 3 November 2001; slightly modified; cf. vol. 4, book 52, no. 297; vol. 5, book 59, no. 515.

7 Jalālu'd-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi* (trans. E. H. Whinfield), vol. 3 (version in the Ocean Library at <http://www.bahai-education.org>).

8 See the second article by Moojan Momen in footnote 4

exegesis. Satan’s sin, for instance, for which he was cast down from heaven, according to the Qur’an, was not to bow down before Adam when commanded by God to do so.<sup>9</sup> Some mystics, such as Farīd al-Dīn Aṭṭār, have said that he declined to do this because he was a true worshipper of divine unity (*muwahhid*) and a lover of God and he refused to bow down before anyone save God, even though he be thrown into hell-fire. He accepted God’s curse as a robe of honour, saying: ‘to be cursed by Thee, is a thousand times dearer to me than to turn my head away from Thee to anything else’.<sup>10</sup>

The point of interest in our context is that, in ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s commentary, the word *fājir*, usually translated as ‘disobedient’, ‘evil’ or ‘wicked’, suddenly becomes positive, meaning *fāriq*, that is ‘distinguishing’ and ‘rich’. Whereas in the *ḥadīth* it is a man who claims to be a Muslim fighting for God’s religion but is designated by Muhammad as *fājir* and a ‘man of hell-fire’; ‘Abdu’l-Baha only elucidates the word *fājir* rather than commenting on the entirety of the *ḥadīth*. Muhammad’s intention in his use of the word *fājir*, says ‘Abdu’l-Baha, is a person rich in the spiritual sense, who will aid the Cause of God by separating between good and evil, forbidden and lawful, truth and error, and one who has knowledge of the divine mysteries.

This interpretation by ‘Abdu’l-Baha may be compared to the interpretation of the same word, *fājir*, made in the commentary by Ibn al-‘Arabi on a verse of the Qur’an dealing with Noah – indeed it may be that ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s questioner was already familiar with this interpretation of this Quranic verse and here ‘Abdu’l-Baha was extending a similar interpretation to the same word appearing in a *ḥadīth*. In this verse of the Qur’an (71:27), Noah calls upon God to destroy all of the unbelievers (*al-kāfirūn*): ‘For if Thou dost spare [any of] them, they will but mislead Thy servants, and they will bring forth (give birth to) none but wicked and unbelieving ones (*fājiran kuffāran*).’ Ibn al-‘Arabi interprets this verse using alternative meanings of the two words *fājiran* and *kuffāran*. The root *f-j-r* has a basic meaning of cleaving or cutting. The usual meaning of *fājir* (of which *fājiran* is the accusative form) is that of a wicked or evil person. However the root *f-j-r* also has meanings of breaking open (of a dam or a river) in order that the waters may burst forth and also the breaking forth of the dawn and it is these usages to which Ibn al-‘Arabi refers. Similarly the root *k-f-r* is usually associated with its meaning of denying or disbelieving in God – and this is the evident meaning in this Quranic verse. But Ibn al-‘Arabi has chosen the alternate meaning of covering or concealing:<sup>11</sup>

‘If you spare them’, that is leave them [as they are], ‘they will confuse your servants’, that is they will perplex them and bring them out from their servanthood into the mysteries of Lordship [that are inherent] in themselves, so that they will consider themselves as Lords after being servants. They will indeed be servants who are Lords. ‘They will only bring forth’, that is they will only bring forth and make manifest ‘one who breaks open (*fājiran*)’, that is one who makes manifest what is hidden, and ‘one who denies’, that is one who conceals what is manifest after its manifestation. They will bring forth what is hidden and then conceal it after its manifestation. And so the beholder will be perplexed, and will not know what the discloser (*fājir*) intends by his disclosure, nor what the concealer (*kāfir*) [intends] by his concealing – though they are [in truth] the same person.<sup>12</sup>

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9 See for example Qur’an 2:28–34, 7: 11–12, 20:116.

10 Annemarie Schimmel translating Aṭṭār ‘Conference of the Birds’ in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 195. On the ambiguous image of Pharaoh and Iblis (Satan), see Peter J. Awn, *Satan’s Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983; and Eric Ormsby, ‘The Faith Of Pharaoh: A Disputed Question In Islamic Theology’, in Todd Lawson (ed.), *Knowledge, Love, Being: New Research in Islamic Thought in Honor of Hermann A. Landolt*, London: Institute of Ismaili Studies and I. B. Tauris, in press.

11 W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (completed by Stanley Lane-Poole), 8 vols., 1863–93, see under *f-j-r* and *k-f-r*.

12 Muhiy al-Din ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, ed. and annotated by Abu al-‘Alā Afīfī, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, no date, 1: 74; translation based on Ibn al ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin, London: SPCK, 1980, pp. 80–81.

Abu al-A‘lā Afīfī, one of the foremost modern commentators on Ibn al-‘Arabī, has glossed the word *fājir* thus:

‘ilā fājiran kuffāran’ and *al-fājir* is from [the root] *al-fajr* meaning to bring out or to make appear – that is to say he who causes the secrets of Lordship to appear in their place of manifestation (*majālīthā*).<sup>13</sup>

In his interpretation, ‘Abdu’l-Baha also uses an alternative meaning of the root *f-j-r*. He has bypassed the usual meaning of *al-fājir* and has gone to the meaning of deviating or separating in his first explanation and that of having much wealth or property in the second explanation.<sup>14</sup>

### Provisional Translation:

He is God!

Some persons have imagined that the word *fājir* in the holy tradition ‘God doth give victory to this religion (Islam) by means of a wicked man’ (*inna’llāha yu’ayyidu hādihā’d-dīn bi-rajulin fājirin*) deriveth from *fujūr* (‘disobedience’, ‘wickedness’). However, the sacred intention of our Lord, his Holiness the Prophet [Muhammad], peace be upon him, of the word *fājir* in the holy tradition, on the contrary, is *fāriq*, that is ‘distinguishing’. This means that the Lord of Grandeur will give victory to this manifest religion by means of the exertion of an honoured person who distinguisheth truth from error. Such a person is endowed with enjoining that which is approved (*amr-i ma’rūf*), and prohibiting that which is rejected (*nahy-i munkar*),<sup>15</sup> he is the manifestation of the holy verse ‘He is fearing not the blame of any blamer’ (*lā ta’khudhuh lawmatu lā’imin*).<sup>16</sup> It is an illustrious person who with divine power distinguisheth pious deeds from evil acts, goodness from unseemliness, knowledge from ignorance, faith from unbelief, trustworthiness from treachery, the accepted from the rejected, guidance from the state of being astray, light from darkness, reality from metaphor, truthfulness from lie, loyalty from cruelty, and the upright from the hypocrite. An honoured person, endowed with such virtues and merits is certainly one who distinguisheth, teareth apart [the veils of superstition?] and is superior.

The word *fājir* has moreover the meaning of ‘rich’ and ‘wealthy’. Therefore, the blessed meaning of the holy tradition is this: the Lord of Grandeur will give victory to this glorious *Sharī’ah* by means of a wealthy person. As thine excellency knoweth, richness and wealth are of two kinds; one is physical, and it consisteth of pure gold. In the opinion of the people it is silver which imparteth joy. This, however, has no value and quality. Even an imperfect man can attain this. The other aspect of wealth and prosperity is true prosperity. This, then, is knowledge derived from God, true faith, divine perception, human virtues, saintly merits, and spiritual honour and excellence. And to this person who manifests this heroic deed belongs ‘a day God will compensate each out of His abundance’ (*yawmun yughni’llāhu kullān min sa’atihi*).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the blessed meaning of the holy tradition is as follows:

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13 Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* 2:43.

14 See Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, see entry for *f-j-r*.

15 *Amr bi’l-ma’rūf wa nahy ‘ani’l-munkar* (‘Enjoining that which is good and forbidding that which is evil’) is one of the most important tenets of Islam; Qur’an 3:104, 110, 114. There are also numerous traditions calling attention to this; for example, Muhammad was asked what the right road is. He replied, ‘Lowering your gaze, refraining from harming others, returning greeting, and enjoining what is good, and forbidding what is evil’; *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, vol. 8, book 74, no. 248.

16 cf. Qur’an 5:54: *lā yukhāfūn lawmata lā’imin*. This verse was a byword of the Sufi Malāmātiyyah movement, those who purposely attracted the blame of people.

17 cf. Qur’an 4:130: *Wa in yatafarrāqā yughni’llāhu kullān min sa’atihi*.

the Lord of Grandeur will give victory to this glorious *Sharī’ah* with an all-wise person who is the manifestation of faculties bestowed by God, the centre of divine knowledge, the dawning-place of divine bounties, the possessor of human virtues, the revealer of the mysteries of reality, one who is cognizant of the signs of prophethood, the knower of the Hidden Mystery (*sirr-i maknūn*), and one who is aware of the Treasured Symbol (*ramz-i maşūn*).<sup>18</sup> This sufficeth as an explanation.

**Latinised text of the tablet:**

*Inna’llâha yu’eyyidu hâza’d-dîni bi-recûlin fâcirin* (“Allâh bu dini bir fâcir vasıtasıyla kuvvetlendirecektir”) hadîs-i şerîfteki “fâcir” kelimesi fücûrdan müştak olduğunu bazı zevât tasavvur etmişlerdir. Halbuki Hazret-i Nebevî, aleyhi’s-salâti ve ’s-selâm efendimizin hadîs-i şerîfte maksad-ı mukaddesleri bilâkis olup “fâcir” kelimesi “fârik” mânasıdır, “ayrıcı” demektir. Yânî, Cenâb-ı Kibriyâ bu din-i mübîni fârik-i hak ve bâtil olan bir zât-ı mükerrerin himmetiyle te’yîd edecektir. Böyle bir zât, emr-i mârufla ve nehy-i münkeriyle muttasıf ve *Lâ ta’huzuh levmetü lâ’imin* (“Ayıpçıların ayıplamasından korkmaz”) âyet-i kerîmenin mazharıdır. Hasenât ve seyyiâtı ve hüsn ü kubhu ve ilm ü cehli ve imân ü küfrü ve emânet ü hiyâneti ve makbûl ü merdûdu ve hidâyet ü dalâleti ve nûr u zulmeti ve hakikat ü mecâzı ve sıdk u kizbi ve vefâ ü cefâyı ve muvâfık u münâfıkı kuvve-i kudsiye ile ayırır bir şahs-ı celîldir. Ve böyle fezâil ve hasâil ile muttasıf olan bir zât-ı mükerrrem elbette fârik ve hârik ve fâiktir.

Bir de kelime-i “fâcir”, ganî ve mütemevvil mânasındadır. Hadîs-i şerîfin şu hâlde mâna-yı münîfi bu olur ki, Cenâb-ı Kibriyâ bu Şerîat-ı garrâyı bir şahs-ı ganî ile te’yîd edecektir. Malûm-ı âlileridir ki, gınâ ve servet iki türlü olur; biri servet-i cismânîdir ki sermâyesi zeheb-i ibriz ve ind el-halk fidda-yı ferah-engîzdir. Bu ise o kadar meziyyet ve şerefi yoktur. Bir insân-ı nâkıs bile ona nâil olabilir. Servet ve gınânın diğer kısmı gınâ-yı hakikîdir. O ise esâsı, ilm-i ledünnî ve îmânı hakikî ve basîret-i Rabbânî ve fezâil-i insânî ve hasâil-i rûhânî ve şeref ü meziyyet-i mânevîdir. Ve bu menâkîba mazhar olan zâta *Yevmün yuğni Allâh küllen min sa’atîhi* (“Allah Kendi bolluğu ile herkesi zengin ettiği gün”)dür. Şu hâlde, hadîs-i şerîfin mâna-yı münîfi bu olur ki: mazhar-ı mevâhib-i ledünnî ve merkez-i maârif-i rabbânî ve matlâ-ı avârif-i sübhânî ve hâiz-i fezâil-i insânî ve kâşif-i esrâr-ı hakikat ve vâkif-ı rümûz-ı nübüvvet ve âlim-i sırr-ı meknûn ve ârif-i remz-i masûn olan bir zât-ı hikmet-meşhûn ile Cenâb-ı Kibriyâ bu şerîat-ı garrâyı te’yîd edecektir. Ve’s-selâm.

(*Majmû’ih-i Alwâh wa Munâjâthâ-yi Turkî*, 2. ed., Tehran 1970/71, 138-42)

18 The terms ‘Hidden Mystery’ and ‘Treasured Symbol’ appear together in Baha’u’llah’s writings and refer to him; see, for example, the Long Obligatory Prayer in *Prayers and Meditations*, Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1987, p. 321; *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1988, pp. 47, 50. In a wider context these designations refer to all Messengers of God: man can attain knowledge of God only through recognition of His Manifestation who was hidden and becomes manifest; cf. Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, vol. 4, Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, p. 139.