"I am all the Prophets":
The Poetics of Pluralism in Baha'i Texts

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Abstract   This paper examines the literary aspects of the Baha'i religion's doctrine of the unity of High Prophets among the major world religions. The analysis focuses on the manner in which the metaphysical identity of Moses and Jesus with Muhammad and Baha'u'llah is naturalized by the use of such genres as the Shiite threnody (*marthiyyah*) for martyred holy figures, by appeal to apostrophe, and by the unexpected mixture of first-person discourse with narrative historical structures. The importance of structuralism, semiotics, and poststructuralism for understanding this way of thinking is explored.

The idea of the equal validity of the world religions tends to evoke one of two reactions. It is often rejected out of hand by those who appeal to Aristotelian logic as contrary to common sense and refuted by the incompatibility of religious doctrines (e.g., Judaism's strict monotheism, Christianity's incarnationism, and Hinduism's pantheism). Such Aristotelians insist that different religions make competing and incompatible truth-claims (Griffiths and Lewis 1983). Among those who find the idea of religious pluralism attractive, this underlying spiritual unity is often merely asserted without being explored in a rigorous manner. Exceptions to this trend include Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1981), John Hick (1985, 1989), and Edmund Perry and N. Ross Reat (1991), who have argued with some cogency the case for the simultaneous truth of each of the world religions. Hick identifies three main theological approaches to the diversity of human religious experience: (1) exclu-

sivists, who see only one mode of religious thought (their own) as true and the others as false; (2) inclusivists, who maintain that their own tradition is blessed with the whole truth, but that other religions might possess some truth; and (3) pluralists, who believe that the great world faiths all embody equally valid human responses to the ultimately Real (Hick 1985: 91). Fundamentalist movements tend to adopt an exclusivist point of view, whereas Roman Catholicism (since Vatican II) has committed itself to inclusivism. Hindu schools of thought likewise tend toward either inclusivism or an overt commitment to pluralism. At least one religion exists for which a pluralist theology of the religions constitutes part of its scriptural essence, and that is the Baha'i faith. Baha'i texts assert not only the underlying unity of the world religions, but also the unity of the High Prophets, or founders of those world religions. I would like to propose a different ground for the study of such issues than the traditional one of philosophy of religion. I believe that their exploration should lead to a concern with textuality and the literariness of religious texts. Since we have in the Baha'i faith a religion whose scriptures often assert the truth of the pluralist position, it raises the question of what rhetorical techniques render this claim of a common ground for all religions immediate and plausible to believers.

The Baha'i faith was founded in the nineteenth-century Middle East by an Iranian nobleman and visionary, Mirza Husayn ʿAli Nuri (1817–1892), also known as Bahaʾuʾllah, or "the Glory of God." Developing out of Iranian Islam and the Babi movement in the mid-nineteenth century, the Baha'i faith arguably represents the emergence of the first new world religion since Islam; it is second only to Christianity as the most widespread religion in the world, claiming five million adherents in 1992, with India now the largest national community.[1] The basic principles of the religion were summarized by one of its leaders, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (who served as its head from 1921 to 1957), as follows:

> The Baha'i Faith recognizes the unity of God and of His Prophets, upholds the principle of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all forms of superstition and prejudice, teaches that the fundamental purpose of religion is to promote concord and harmony, that it must go hand-in-hand with science, and that it constitutes the sole and ultimate basis of a peaceful, an ordered and a progressive society. It inculcates the principle of equal opportunity, rights and privileges for both sexes, advocates compulsory education, abolishes extremes of poverty and wealth, exalts work performed in the spirit of service to the rank of worship, recommends the adoption of an auxiliary international language, and provides the necessary agencies for

1. On the Baha'i religion, see the excellent surveys by Peter Smith (1987) and by Smith and Moojan Momen (1989). On the unity of the High Prophets, see Cole (1982) and Christopher Buck (1986).

the establishment and safeguarding of a permanent and universal peace. (Hatcher and Martin 1984: 85)

Passages about the unity of the High Prophets and of the world religions abound in Baha'u'llah's writings, for he made this principle one of the cornerstones of his new religion. The precise roots and original context of the Baha'i belief in the spiritual unity of Moses and Muhammad, of Zoroaster and Jesus, can be traced primarily to the esoteric and eschatological motifs of Iranian Islam, although other influences are also apparent (Corbin 1971–72). Shoghi Effendi wrote that the Baha'i faith's

> teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. 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.   (Rabbani 1969 [1938]: 58)

One influential Baha'i philosopher has argued that the criteria for the truth of a prophetic message is that it offer believers ethical and spiritual guidance, that it be long-lasting in its impact, that it embrace large numbers of people, and that it inspire both a new organized religion and, ultimately, a civilization.[2]

Throughout the history of Islam, mainline Muslim clerics tended to deny the truth of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and they refused to accept the existing Bible as reliably transmitted scripture. The nineteenth century witnessed, however, the growth of a class of intellectuals who were not themselves clergy and who proved more open to outside influences. Many Iranian intellectuals became interested in the Zoroastrian past of their country, and their knowledge of this non-Abrahamic tradition had a relativizing effect on their religious ideas. The indigenous Jewish community represented an area of interest for other intellectuals, some of whom learned Hebrew, while Iran's close cultural and economic links with India brought many merchants and travelers into contact with Hinduism. Finally, the activities of Christian missionaries as well as new Arabic and Persian translations of the Bible made the Christian scriptures available to literate Iranians. This atmosphere of modern inquiry formed a backdrop for the development of Baha'i.[3] The Baha'i faith differs from mainstream Islam not only in recognizing prophets who followed Muhammad and in adhering to a new, liberalized religious law, but also in acknowledging the truth of South Asian and other non-Abrahamic faiths and

2. For a late nineteenth-century expression of the Baha'i philosophy of the truth of world religions, see Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani (1982: 152–57).
3. See Abbas Amanat (1989) on religious diversity in nineteenth-century Iran.

in accepting the existing Bible along with other holy books as gen-
erally valid scriptural texts. This theological pluralism differs from
syncretism in that the Baha'i faith affirms the various religions in their
world-historical specificity from the standpoint of a new and indepen-
dent tradition with its own distinctive rituals, laws, and theology. This
affirmation of unity-with-difference is made possible by a relativist
epistemology (Momen 1988).

Here I wish to analyze two texts by Baha'u'llah that speak of the
unity of the High Prophets, and I will focus especially on their poet-
ics, that is, on the literary and semiotic techniques employed by the
author to render this idea plausible. By "semiotics" I mean the study of
signs, in the sense that anything that can substitute for something else
in human communication is a sign (Eco 1976). I propose that these
methods can make sense of the seeming paradoxes in this tradition of
religious discourse. Each text, theorists suggest, is shaped by its own
deep structures, the specific context of its enunciation, and the culture
within which it is expressed. Enunciation has to do with the way that
texts are shaped by authors, their situations in life, and the genres
they employ. Cultural structures have more to do with paradigms and
systems of culturally specific signs. Before proceeding to analyze the
deep structures of the texts under consideration, therefore, we need
to consider the other systems of signification that shape them (Green-
wood 1985: 30; on contextualization, see Chatman 1990).

Let us begin with enunciation, the setting-in-life of Baha'u'llah at
the time when he wrote. Shiite Islam laid a special emphasis on escha-
tological and millenarian expectations, and a wave of conviction that
the Islamic Mahdi, or messiah, would arise in A.H. 1260 (1844) swept
through the Shiite world early in the nineteenth century. Thereafter,
according to Muslim belief, such figures as the Imam Husayn (the
Prophet's martyred grandson) and Jesus Christ would return before
the general Resurrection. The Shaykhi school in particular expected
an imminent advent. A faction of the Shaykhis found their Mahdi in
the person of Sayyid ʿAli Muhammad Shirazi, who claimed to be a
Bab, or intermediary between the divine and humans. His teachings
spread throughout Iran, and by 1849 he is said to have had 100,000
followers in a population of about seven million. The Iranian state
had the Bab executed for heresy in 1850, but violent conflicts had
already begun to erupt between Babis and conservative Shiites by the
late 1840s, leading to state intervention and a crackdown on the new
religion (Amanat 1989; Lawson 1988).

One of the Bab's teachings had been that in the future another mes-
sianic figure would arise, "He whom God would make manifest." This
additional messianic stage accorded with the popular Shiite belief that
the advent of the Mahdi would be followed by the return of Jesus

Christ and Imam Husayn, so the Babi community seethed with advent-
ist expectations. In 1863, Baha'u'llah, a Babi leader exiled from Teh-
ran to Baghdad in 1852, announced that he was the "One whom God
would make Manifest," after harboring this messianic secret for over a
decade (Cole 1984). In the same year, he was exiled from Baghdad to
Istanbul and thence to Edirne (Adrianople), in Rumelia. From Edirne,
Baha'u'llah sent many letters back to the Babis in Iran, declaring him-
self their promised one. Most Babis then became Baha'is, or followers
of Baha'u'llah, deserting the nominal Babi leader, Baha'u'llah's un-
charismatic half-brother, Azal. The Ottomans then exiled Baha'u'llah
in 1868 to Akka (St. Jean d'Acre), in Ottoman Syria, where he died in
1892. He spent the last twenty-four years of his life creating laws, prin-
ciples, and institutions for his new religion. These included the unity
of God, the unity of the world religions, the unity of humankind, and
the need for a world language and a form of global governance. He
also advocated parliamentary democracy in the absolutist Middle East,
disarmament, and more state spending on education and the poor,
and he argued for the implementation of collective security, whereby
any country that attacked another would be subject to retaliation by
the rest of the world's nations (Cole 1988a, 1992).

I am concerned in this paper to analyze two texts by Baha'u'llah in
which the unity of the prophets, or "Manifestations of God" (mazahir-
i ilahi), is asserted. What is most striking about the longer of these two
texts is not its overt philosophy of religion, but its literary qualities,
and it is upon these that I wish to concentrate. I believe that the liter-
ary character of Baha'u'llah's writing, namely, his use of presentation
and narrative, of point of view, of such techniques as apostrophe, and
of a rich Persian heritage of allegory and metaphor, helps to make
his pluralist religious doctrines plausible to readers. I will also show
that apprehending the structure of his imagery, that is, his opposi-
tions and their mediation, can further illuminate his writings on this
issue. It seems to me that a principle like the unity of religions, which
discounts the differences among religious doctrines, must be inves-
tigated by means of a different logic than the standard Aristotelian
sort in which a proposition has only one valid meaning and surface
contradictions between two propositions invalidate one or the other.
Theologian Daniel Patte has referred to syllogistic reasoning as the
"logic of argumentation" and has contrasted it to the sort of thought
processes that such anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss have found
in myths. I call this mythopoeic reasoning "spiritual logic" and find its
main attributes to consist in a concern with symbolic structures and
dialectical thinking, which, as the poststructuralists have pointed out,
may be rather more semantically unstable than Lévi-Strauss at first
envisioned. Along with Edmund Leach and other anthropologists, I

accept that spiritual logic occurs in the text-based world religions as well as in mythology.[4] As I shall argue below, by understanding the workings of spiritual logic and of rhetorical and poetical devices, we can better understand Baha'u'llah's ideas on the unity of the High Prophets and other, lesser holy figures, whom he collectively terms the "Manifestations of God." Clearly, this discussion is premised on the idea that among the things that make sacred history more meaningful than secular history is the operation upon it of spiritual logic. Sacred biography, such as Genesis on Abraham, or Mark on Jesus, probably has a historical basis, but the mere feature of general historicity cannot explain the enduring existential salience of these biographies for people of faith throughout the world. Spiritual logic constitutes a meaningful way of thinking about sacred biography.

Cosmology, Performance, and the Identity of the Divine Intermediaries

When applied to a sequence of events, or narrative, the logic of argumentation requires that difference be considered significant. A detective will deduce that a small, thin man did not commit a particular murder because the footprints in the mud at the scene of the crime are those of a heavy-set man. In mythology, folktales, and other sorts of imaginative discourse, distinctions are still drawn, but the meaning of any single element is not absolute, depending, rather, on its relationship to other elements of the story. The implication here is that in different tellings of a meaningful story, one could substitute one element for another without necessarily altering the meaning of the tale. The Russian student of folktales Vladimir Propp argued that the functions of characters remain stable in a tale, no matter which character fulfills them. Thus, in a plot where "the witch kidnaps the king's daughter," the teller of tales could easily substitute "dragon" or another supernatural being for "witch" without substantially altering the plot. The other characters could likewise be changed, for instance, "wife" instead of "daughter" (Propp 1968: 19–22). The function, in this conception, consists of the character's action viewed in relation to its significance to the plot.

Baha'u'llah's writings on sacred history, I would argue, can be similarly studied in terms of their formal structure. The biography of each prophet as he narrates it, in other words (so to speak), contains similar plot functions. This is not to say that he saw these prophets' biographies as fictional or that his writings about them constitute a sort of fiction. Over the past two decades, literary theory has in any

4. See Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1983); Patte (1983); Leach (1969); Leach and Ayrock (1983). For poststructuralist elaborations, see Mark Taylor (1982, 1984) and Jonathan Culler (1981).

case increasingly questioned the absolute distinction between fictional and nonfictional discourse, and such writers as Hayden White (1978) and Robert F. Berkhofer (1988) have argued that even historical narrative tends to be cast in the form of literary tropes. Certainly, the telling of stories about prophets and other holy figures constituted a well-defined hagiographic genre in Shiite Iran, one with its own conventions and literary traditions.

The unity of religions and the unity of their High Prophets are very closely linked in Baha'u'llah's thought. He conceives of religion as *revealed*, but he sees the ritual and doctrinal aspects of revelation as relative to the age in which they were revealed, subject to abrogation at a later age. This lapsing of the divine law associated with a religion, however, does not imply that the religion has been abrogated or become invalid as a means of approaching the Real, although the idea of progressive revelation suggests that more recent religions are more relevant to the age than earlier ones.

> There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. (Baha'u'llah 1982: 217; 1984: 141–42)

Although Baha'u'llah himself spoke primarily of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Babism, and the Baha'i faith itself, it is easy to see how his son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Baha' (1844–1921), was able to extend this philosophical framework to encompass the religions of Buddha and Krishna as well.

Baha'u'llah's ideas about the nature of time and cosmology also form an important backdrop to his conception of the unity of the Manifestations of God. Concepts of time, after all, have been bound up with those of being since the Greeks, at least. Babis and Baha'is believed in the doctrine of the eternal return, which differs in essential aspects from the similar theory propounded by Friedrich Nietzsche and rather resembles that of Plotinus (Magnus 1978: 61–62). Baha'u'llah believed that the basic drama of a prophetic figure's advent, followed by his preaching, then his rejection and persecution, and finally the triumph of his religion was reenacted from millennium to millennium. In each instance, the prophetic figure constituted a manifestation of the Logos (*kalimatu'llah*, or Word of God). The Bab had likewise seen each of the High Prophets as "Manifestations of the Primal Will," the Primal Will being synonymous with the Logos

or the Neoplatonists' Universal Intellect (S. Shirazi 1976: 126; 1978: 90). This Babi/Baha'i notion of the eternal return differed from that of Nietzsche insofar as it primarily concerned sacred history and as it allowed for progress. In this periodically reenacted holy drama, functions do recur in the Proppian sense.

Baha'u'llah believed that each new revelation represented both an advance upon, and a working out of themes in, the preceding religious civilization. This idea of progress introduces linearity into Baha'i conceptions of time. History is commonly viewed as cyclically recurring patterns in South Asian traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, whereas most Abrahamic religions of the Near East have had a linear conception of history, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Theologian Mark C. Taylor, however, has questioned the absoluteness of this distinction:

> It is, of course, common to distinguish interpretations of time by juxtaposing the metaphors of circle and line. Frequently it is argued that in the East time is viewed as a circle in which beginning and end coincide. In the West, by contrast, time tends to be regarded as a linear process in which the end surpasses the beginning. . . . Any facile opposition between circular and linear views of time, however, obscures important similarities that these two perspectives share. Both circle and line are *forms of closure* and *figures of plenitude* that serve as *totalizing metaphors*. (Taylor 1984: 69–70 [emphases in original])

The Babi and Baha'i schema reinforces Taylor's point about the speciousness of this dichotomy by combining a cyclical with a linear view, producing something like a spiral or W. B. Yeats's "gyre." This conception of time, as it operates in sacred history, underpins the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation.

Since we are concerned here with the identity of the prophets, it is the cyclical aspect of sacred history which we must primarily consider. In his *Book of Certitude*, Baha'u'llah made the argument that some verses of the Koran supported the Babi idea of the eternal return insofar as they addressed the unbelievers of the Prophet's own day in terms that identified them with those who had rejected Moses or Jesus, lambasting his own Arab contemporaries for the sins of Jesus' persecutors six centuries earlier (Koran 2:89):

> Strive therefore to comprehend the meaning of "return" which hath been so explicitly revealed in the Qur'an itself, and which none hath as yet understood. What sayest thou? If thou sayest that Muhammad was the "return" of the Prophets of old, as is witnessed by this verse, His Companions must likewise be the "return" of the bygone Companions, even as the "return" of the former people is clearly attested by the text of the above-mentioned verses. (Baha'u'llah 1900: 126–27; 1970: 151)

The Babi/Baha'i concept of the eternal return differs considerably from the idea of reincarnation. In Hinduism reincarnation involves the return of an individual soul in another body. The Baha'i scriptures, however, assert that the individual soul, once having left the earthly plane, never returns, but rather progresses through other planes of existence toward God. What, then, "returns"? This tradition of thought sees the individual as a conjunction of essence and attributes and sees a constellation of attributes as representing something like psychological archetypes that recur in later personalities ('Abdu'l-Baha' 1981 [1907]: 132–34; 1983: 95–97). The Babis and Baha'is placed great emphasis on the eternal return of these personality archetypes. The Baha'i view of sacred history also shares certain elements with the formalist conception of narrative functions. The early Baha'is in the Middle East conceived of the roles in the prophetic drama as rather like functions that various actors could fulfill without changing the basic outline of the story. Not only did Jesus step into the role once played by Moses and then Muhammad into that once played by Jesus, but their companions and disciples also represented a return of the prophets' supporters, and their enemies recur as well.

Nor is this language of the theater, of script and dramatis personae, anachronistic when applied to Iranian religious ideas of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of that century, a popular custom grew up of staging dramatic performances that depicted the stories and sufferings of holy figures, rather like the mystery plays produced in medieval Europe. These dramas consisted of story cycles, which included the tale of Abraham's near sacrifice of his eldest son and Joseph's betrayal by his brothers as well as purely Islamic and Shiite themes.[5] It is likely that these dramatic depictions made it easier for popular audiences to imagine the "return" of holy figures from the past and so aided the spread of the Baha'i kerygma.

An appreciation of these Shiite passion plays requires a basic knowledge of controversial events and personalities in early Islam, for the "Karbala paradigm," as anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer has called it, constitutes a key element of the cultural system that helped shape both the Muslim and the Baha'i texts under discussion. Fischer defines a "paradigm" as a story that can include cosmology, history, and even everyday problems viewed against a contrasting background, all of which is linked by ritual or physical drama (Fischer 1980: 13–27). These elements are eminently present in the foundational narratives of Shiite Islam and their later commemorative reenactments. The Prophet Muhammad, despite beginning from a weak social position

5. See, for example, the script of the Abraham story in Mehdi Forough (n.d.).

and facing much persecution, put together an impressive religious and political coalition after 622 c.e. and, by the time of his death in western Arabia in 632, ruled over a nascent theocratic state. Shiites believe that after the Prophet's death his family and their descendants should have wielded Islamic political and spiritual power. In fact, the leadership of the Muslim empire fell to a series of elected caliphs (only one of whom, ʿAli—assassinated in 661—was closely related to Muhammad) and finally devolved on the Umayyad dynasty. In 680 c.e., the prophet's grandson Husayn attempted to launch an uprising against the Umayyads from the Iraqi plain of Karbala. Umayyad troops moved in to put down the rebellion, a task they brutally accomplished. After a siege on Husayn's camp (which included women and children), the would-be leader, or "Imam," Husayn was killed in 681, along with many of his relatives and other supporters, and his head was reportedly brought back to the Umayyad king on an upraised spear. Since many older Muslims remembered Husayn as a toddler dandled on the Prophet's knee, his killing and the massacre of his supporters shocked the Islamic world. Supporters of the House of the Prophet, who eventually became known as the Shiites (literally, "partisans"), saw Husayn as a martyr whose blood was redemptive. They gradually developed mourning rituals to commemorate Husayn's martyrdom on the tenth of the month of Muharram. During the fifteenth century, the ritual reading of a series of elegies on each of the first ten days of Muharram became popular. After the Shiite revival of the sixteenth century (when Shiite-ruled states were established in Iran, and in Golconda, Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, and Kashmir in India), such ritual lamentations, which took the forms of both prose and poetry, became firmly institutionalized in the Islamic East. As noted above, in nineteenth-century Iran a popular drama was developed on the themes of Husayn's uprising and martyrdom, although the dramatic cycles often included stories of earlier prophets, such as Abraham and Joseph, as well as the death of Muhammad himself and the martyrdom of his son-in-law ʿAli. This Shiite performance tradition, I would argue, already contained the implicit theme of the functional unity of the holy figures whose lives were dramatized (see Chelkowski 1979).[6]

All this background is needed to appreciate the two texts by Bahaʾuʾllah in which the unity is made explicit and to which I now return. The specific enunciatory context for one of these works was Bahaʾuʾllah's declaration of himself as the promised one to the Babis in the year 1280/1863–64. Among the broader cultural structures that inform these Baha'i texts are a cyclical conception of sacred time and

6. For types and genres of Shiite mourning ceremonies in the Islamic East, see Cole (1988b: 92–119).

the Persian performance tradition of passion plays that commemo-
rated the suffering not only of Imam Husayn, but of such prophets as
Abraham, Joseph, and Muhammad.

Genre and Transformation

The first text that I wish to discuss, the Surah of Blood (*Surat ad-dam*),
occupies a special position among Baha'u'llah's writings, since it was
among the first in which he openly declared his mission from his exile
in Edirne to the Babis in Iran (the text is provisionally dated to winter/
spring 1864). He addressed the Surah of Blood to a close compan-
ion then in Iran, Muhammad "Nabil" Zarandi (d. 1892), saying that
the truth could finally be revealed after remaining hidden for twenty
years (Baha'u'llah 1968: 1–15).[7] Prominent supporters of Baha'u'llah,
such as Nabil, typically shared their letters from him with other local
Babis in hopes of attracting them to the Baha'i religion. The initial
audience for such texts was thus the Babi communities, mainly in Iraq
and Iran, which in the 1860s subsisted secretly as a result of Qajar
and clerical persecution of them as heretics. The Babis included peas-
ant villagers and urban artisans, intellectuals, and merchants, of both
sexes, reflecting the religion's character as a mass movement. Although
there may have been as many as 100,000 Babis in 1849, by the 1860s
persecution had reduced their ranks to only a few thousand. In the
space of a few years, almost all of these remaining Babis had come
over to Baha'u'llah's side. Baha'i emissaries shared his epistles with
other Iranians as well, and, between Baha'u'llah's initial declaration in
1863 and his death in 1892, tens of thousands of converts embraced
the new religion, coming from the ranks of mainstream Shiism as
well as from the Shaykhi, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities. By
1900, there were between 50,000 and 100,000 Baha'is in Iran, which
then had a population of around nine million. Baha'u'llah's letters
were copied and circulated by professional copyists, chanted aloud
and paraphrased in Persian by the literate in the community for the
illiterate, and in 1890 they began to be printed for wider distribution
by Baha'is in Bombay.

Baha'u'llah, who received a visit from Nabil in Edirne not too long
before the Surah of Blood was composed, bids his disciple to travel
from city to city in Iran, spreading the news that Baha'u'llah is the
promised one of the Bab. Baha'u'llah makes this claim in two ways:
first, he speaks of himself as the archetypal return of the Bab him-
self; second, he uses a literary device to evoke an image of himself
as the stricken Imam Husayn, dying upon the plain of Karbala while

7. An account of Nabil's early Baha'i missionary work in Iran may be found in
Habibu'llah Shirazi (n.d.); see also Adib Taherzadeh (1974–87: II, 236–40).

speaking his last words and revealing his true identity. As noted above, Shiites commonly expected the return of the Imam Husayn after the rise of the Mahdi, so most Babis would have immediately recognized the claim implied by this imagery. Baha'u'llah was able to play on a very rich repertoire of literary competencies in his audience, given the centrality of lamentations for Imam Husayn as a genre in Iranian and Shiite culture. He was also able to create surprise and suspense by occasionally contradicting the various expectations that his use of the genre would have aroused.

Baha'u'llah employs the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala as an extended metaphor for his own exile to and persecution in Ottoman Europe. He tells Nabil that if friends in Iran ask about Baha'u'llah, he should inform them that when he, Nabil, had departed out of the prison city (Edirne), "Husayn" was lying on the ground, the knee of the enemy on his chest and a sword raised above his head. Nabil is depicted as having bent down to listen to the fallen Imam, whose heart-rending plaint breaks the heart of God himself. "Husayn" says that he has revealed verses redolent of God, just as Joseph's coat conveyed the smell of the young man to his father, Jacob, after his kidnapping. If people perceive the perfume of the divine in his verses, they should not respond by killing him. "Husayn"/Baha'u'llah asserts that he kept a messianic secret for twenty years, but that God then opened his lips, so he is now calling upon the Babis to recognize him as the spiritual return of the Bab himself.

The hero pauses, overcome by weakness from his war wounds. Then the dying "Husayn" speaks again, addressing God in the following words:

> Praise be to Thee, O Lord My God, for the wondrous revelations of Thy inscrutable decree and the manifold woes and trials Thou hast destined for Myself. At one time Thou didst deliver me into the hands of Nimrod; at another Thou hast allowed Pharaoh's rod to persecute Me. Thou, alone, canst estimate, through Thine all-encompassing knowledge and the operation of Thy Will, the incalculable afflictions I have suffered at their hands. Again Thou didst cast Me into the prison-cell of the ungodly, for no reason except that I was moved to whisper into the ears of the well-favored denizens of Thy Kingdom an intimation of the vision with which Thou hadst, through Thy knowledge, inspired Me, and revealed to Me its meaning through the potency of Thy might. And again Thou didst decree that I be beheaded by the sword of the infidel. Again I was crucified for having unveiled to men's eyes the hidden gems of Thy glorious unity, for having revealed to them the wondrous signs of Thy sovereign and everlasting power. How bitter the humiliations heaped upon Me, in a subsequent age, on the plain of Karbila! How lonely did I feel amidst Thy people! To what a state of helplessness was I reduced in that land! Unsatisfied with such indignities, my persecutors decapitated Me, and, carrying aloft My

head from land to land paraded it before the gaze of the unbelieving mul-
titude, and deposited it on the seats of the perverse and faithless. In a later
age, I was suspended, and My breast was made a target to the darts of the
malicious cruelty of My foes. My limbs were riddled with bullets and My
body was torn asunder. Finally, behold how, in this Day, My treacherous
enemies have leagued themselves against Me, and are continually plotting
to instill the venom of hate and malice into the souls of Thy servants. With
all their might they are scheming to accomplish their purpose. . . . Grievous
as is My plight, O God, My Well-Beloved, I render thanks unto Thee, and
My Spirit is grateful for whatsoever hath befallen Me in the path of Thy
good-pleasure.   (Baha'u'llah 1968: IV, 8–10; 1982: 88–90)

Let us first consider some formal aspects of this text before proceed-
ing to questions of its deep structures and spiritual logic, beginning
with the distinction made in literary criticism between direct presen-
tation and mediated narration. Direct presentation is primarily a first-
person, present-tense discourse, a subjective articulation that makes
evaluative judgments. Mediated narration, on the other hand, tends to
be rendered in the third-person voice, to be set in the past, and to rep-
resent itself as an objective report on a universe of events and persons
who are, from that point of view, real (Chatman 1978: 32, 146). This
text combines elements of both direct presentation and mediated nar-
ration insofar as it alludes to a series of stories and, for the most part,
employs the past tense. But the narrative voice is first-person, and the
final scene (Baha'u'llah's own persecution) is set in the present. Of
course, all complex discourse involves both subjective enactment and
a past-tense narration; few novels, for instance, can avoid having ele-
ments of both (Culler 1975: 197–99). But here the mixture of direct
presentation and mediated narration appears to represent a deliberate
attempt to obliterate the boundaries that the audience would normally
erect between past and present and between the various divine emis-
saries in sacred history. The use of the first-person point of view, and
its maintenance across the entire range of protagonists, aims, as does
any use of point of view, to "impose a story world upon a reader (or lis-
tener)" (Moore 1989: 26). All of the prophets or holy figures here are
but manifestations of a single archetype, the Logos, or Word of God,
and all speak with the same first-person voice. Sacred history thus be-
comes a form of autobiography since the Logos itself is represented as
speaking from the latest locus of its manifestation, Baha'u'llah. More-
over, the first-person voice shatters the conventions of the stylized
lamentation for Husayn, which has always been presented as third-
person, objective, mediated narration, but here becomes subjective
enactment.

The author also employs some conventions of the traditional prose
lament for the martyred Imam Husayn (often codified in books known

as Ten Sessions [*Dah Majlis*], one chapter of which is read on each of the first ten days of the holy month of Muharram). Any nineteenth-century Muslim audience east of the Red Sea would have known and understood the conventions of this genre. Why, however, would Baha'u'llah have chosen to declare his status as a messianic prophet through the stylized lamentation for Imam Husayn? To answer this question, it will be helpful to think about not only what a genre is, but also what it does: "A genre, we might say, is a conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text" (Culler 1975: 137; see also Eco 1979). We usually know when we begin to read a work whether it is a tragedy or a comedy, and our foreknowledge of its genre influences the way we read it by raising specific expectations in us.

This set of expectations is a powerful tool in the hands of authors who know how to use it, for they can employ a genre to make their discourse seem natural. Naturalization through genre means that what might otherwise appear strange or deviant is, by being cast in a particular literary form, made to seem inevitable (Barthes 1974: 22–23). Baha'u'llah's assertion that he was the promised one of the Bab, the very voice of all the past prophets and holy figures, would have struck many ordinary nineteenth-century Middle Easterners as strange and unacceptable. By appealing to the genre of the lamentation for Husayn, however, Baha'u'llah could disarm that feeling of strangeness and naturalize his message. On the other hand, as noted above, some features of the text (such as the use of first-person voice and allegory) deliberately violate the conventions of the genre for effect.

Baha'u'llah's identification with Husayn functioned at the level of millenarian expectations as well, for Shiites believed that the Imam Husayn would supernaturally return after the appearance of the Mahdi. Since Baha'u'llah's Babi contemporaries believed that the Bab represented the coming of the Mahdi, many expected the Imam Husayn himself to return soon. By the mid-1860s, the Bab had been dead for fifteen years and his followers had been severely persecuted. Many yearned for the advent of Husayn to set things aright. Finally, since we are dealing with a culture in which names were often thought to signify fate, it should be remembered that Baha'u'llah's given name was Husayn 'Ali. If, for his partisans, "Husayn" invoked the martyred Imam, "'Ali" signified the return of the Bab himself.

Another formal aspect of this text is its use of apostrophe. Here, the character turns away from the person or audience to whom she or he was speaking and addresses someone else, often an invisible or supernatural presence, such as a spirit, a muse, or a god (Culler 1981: 142, 149–52). The text of the Surah of Blood has the general frame-

work of a letter to Nabil Zarandi, as noted above. But the scene that Baha'u'llah conjures up, of Husayn's martyrdom and appeal to God, has the form of an apostrophe. Baha'u'llah inserts Nabil into this dramatic scene, having him bend down to listen to Husayn's dying words. But Husayn does not address Nabil. He gazes skyward and delivers an apostrophe to God, reminding him of the suffering that he has imposed on the Eternal Prophet. Baha'u'llah, the real speaker, thereby stresses his special relationship to the divine for Nabil, the real audience. Just as a poet achieves a new identity by addressing nature, thus demonstrating his ability to evoke the images of nature's power, so the prophet reconstitutes himself as a visionary by speaking to God in the presence of humans.

The use of apostrophe also helps to accomplish another key aim of this passage, the annihilation of time. We have already seen how this purpose is served by the mixing of presentation and narrative. The text asserts the single identity of all the prophets and holy figures mentioned. These individuals, of course, lived centuries apart, and their temporal discontinuity makes it difficult for the intellect to accept their unity. One of apostrophe's main features, stressed by Culler, is that it locates all of the persons and things being addressed in the speaker's time (present), thus evading the temporal constraints on typical story sequences. Every person and event referred to in the apostrophe is simultaneously present within the address. Lyric poets use this technique to establish timelessness, as Baha'u'llah does to obliterate the millennia separating Abraham from himself, thereby revealing diverse holy figures to be facets of the same gem.

Let us turn now to the structure of the text. As noted, all of these events are narrated in the first person, emphasizing the essentially singular identity of the patriarchs, prophets, and holy figures of and for whom the narrator speaks. The order is generally, but not consistently, chronological. This lament enumerates a set of oppositions, each of which is a transformation of the preceding set. If we list them as they appear successively in the discourse, they are:

God allows	Nimrod	to oppress	Abraham
God allows	Pharaoh	to oppress	Moses
God		imprisons	Joseph
God		beheads	John
God		crucifies	Jesus
	people	behead	Husayn
	people	execute	the Bab
	enemies	persecute	Baha'u'llah

Several questions arise from this way of looking at the text. First, why is the lament directed against God, and why is he depicted as the archetypal persecutor? Baha'u'llah appears to blame God for the suf-

ferings he has endured in his advent as each of these holy figures since
God allowed each nemesis to persecute him. God is said to have given
Abraham into Nimrod's hands, and Moses into Pharaoh's (in Muslim
tradition, as in the Jewish Haggadah, Nimrod persecuted Abraham
[Heller 1924]). In some instances, the persecution is said to have been
carried out by God himself, such as when God cast Joseph into prison
and decreed John the Baptist's beheading. The wording implies that
Egyptian officials and Herod were only his tools. Baha'u'llah's text also
blames God for "lifting me up upon the cross" (*arfa'tani ila al-salib*).
The persecutions of Husayn, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah are conducted
by some agency, but the divine hand in them is not distinctly delin-
eated and the oppressors are not specifically named. This increasing
vagueness allows the oppressors of the later figures to be depicted in
general, and therefore archetypal, terms. Perhaps the later generality
also derives from the difficulty of assigning just one foe to Baha'u'llah,
who was persecuted by the Iranian and Ottoman governments, by the
clergy of both major branches of Islam, and by the Babi partisans of
his half-brother Azal, who rejected his claim to be the promised one
of the Bab. On the other hand, maybe specifically naming his power-
ful persecutors would have rendered his letter to Nabil too dangerous
for circulation. The structure of this text suggests that all persecu-
tors of holy figures can be assimilated to Pharaoh, regardless of their
historical identity.

Surprisingly, at the end of the lament, Baha'u'llah thanks God for
whatever he decreed, recalling the theme of the Book of Job, where
the righteous individual is deliberately tested by God, who allows the
wicked devil to persecute him; in order to pass the test, the righteous
man must display unswerving devotion to God even when his fate
turns bitter. (In 1863, not long before composing this text, Baha'u'llah
had written a tablet, or treatise, that expatiated upon the Job para-
digm [Baha'u'llah 1973: 262–312].) Although in other, similar pas-
sages, such prophetic suffering is viewed as a means of salvation for
believers, here the theme of the one who suffers for the many does
not emerge.

The remarkable feature of this text, and the reason that I have
begun with it, is the poetic identification of all these prophets and holy
figures with one another and with Baha'u'llah himself. They are given
just one voice throughout history, whether speaking as Abraham or as
Baha'u'llah. Their life stories of suffering and persecution, however
different in specifics, are presented as exemplifying a universal para-
digm. God gives a righteous man the power to reveal holy verses or to
interpret divine visions to the people. This manifestation of a super-
natural gift provokes powerful enemies, who oppress the prophet, a
tyranny which God is said to allow or even decree. The oppression

ends in martyrdom or imprisonment for the holy figure (depriva-
tion of life and deprivation of freedom being equivalent here). The
enemies, whether identified or implied, are typically kings. Nimrod
oppressed Abraham, Pharaoh attacked Moses, Herod had John the
Baptist beheaded, Yazid, the Umayyad monarch, ordered his armies
to put down Husayn's uprising in 680 c.e., and Nasiru'd-Din Shah
(r. 1848–1896) presided over the Iranian governments that executed
the Bab and exiled Baha'u'llah. The basic opposition thus established
here is secular domination versus prophetic authority. Some ques-
tions seem to remain unanswered. Why, exactly, does the advent of a
prophet in their country enrage the monarch and his subjects, for ex-
ample? And why are the kings seen as instruments of God's will when
they oppress the holy figure? This text answers such questions, but
only indirectly. Joseph is represented as saying that he was incarcer-
ated "for no reason except that I was moved to whisper into the ears
of the well-favored denizens of Thy Kingdom an intimation of the
vision with which Thou hadst, through Thy knowledge, inspired Me,
and revealed to me its meaning through the potency of Thy might."
Joseph had merely revealed to those who believed in the unknow-
ability of God a small portion of the vision God had granted him. The
only other explanation given occurs in connection with Jesus, who was
crucified "for having unveiled to men's eyes the hidden gems of Thy
glorious unity." The prophet arouses opposition because he affords
glimpses into the world of the divine and because he affirms the unity
of God. He bridges the gap between the natural and the supernatu-
ral through his revelation, thus establishing a connection between two
planes of being, which, of course, is the anomaly. The world of God
and the world of human beings are separate, and they are not meant
to be bridged. Whoever does so, the text implies, is punished, by both
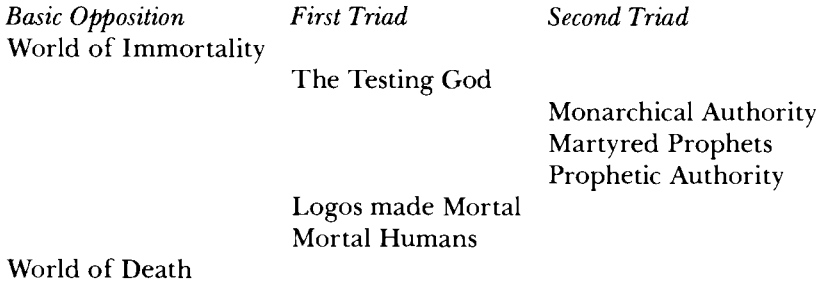God and human beings.

The oppression of the prophet mediates the contradiction entailed
by the irruption, through him, of the divine into the secular world.
That God "commands" the prophet's punishment is, perhaps, a theo-
logical expression of its inevitability. We find in this passage something
more than the testing of the righteous man reminiscent of the Job
narrative. The overtone is rather that of Isaiah's suffering servant or,
to draw on another paradigm altogether, of Prometheus. For in Greek
mythology Prometheus stole the secret of fire from the gods and gave
it to human beings. He bridged the divine and human worlds, trans-
ferring technology from the one to the other, for which the gods
condemned him to eternal suffering. In the Abrahamic religions, the
intermediary transfers not material technology, but knowledge about
the other world that transforms spiritual life. The Abrahamic code is
the opposite of the Promethean one. Prometheus steals from the gods

what they wish to keep, and they punish him themselves for bridging the eternal and the mortal realms. In the Abrahamic religions, God deliberately sends the prophet to open a pathway between the two worlds. In Baha'u'llah's text, God recognizes that this act will inevitably arouse the wrath of some human beings, but allows them to punish the prophet. He thereby tests the righteousness of the person whom he has chosen as his envoy.

The Job-like test, as intimated above, cannot be the entire answer, however. If God has deliberately sent prophets into the world, why does he essentially decree their torture and death? Here I think we must look at a deep structure, the opposition in the text between the immortal divine world and the mortal earthly one. God exists in a realm of immortality where death does not exist, while humans live in a realm where existence is finite. If God sends messengers from his immortal plane into the world of death, the very act is a death sentence. The text suggests that communication between the two worlds requires that an immortal principle, such as the Logos, or God's Word, become mortal. This paradox is expressed poetically in the text by the statement that Jesus was crucified because he revealed to men knowledge of the nature of God. It was impossible for the Word to be communicated to humans without becoming flesh, and, once having become so, it was condemned to death. God is ultimately responsible for that suffering and death insofar as he commanded the revelation of himself in the mortal world through Jesus and others.

The passage does not overtly indicate the reason why people, and especially kings, rise up to persecute those to whom God grants visions and revelations, but the implicit conflict between heavenly authority and earthly domination seems clear enough. The prophet, as German sociologist Max Weber recognized, claims authority on charismatic and religious bases. He will most often, then, come into conflict with the secular bureaucracy and the patrimonial state, which claim worldly domination on rational or traditional grounds (Weber 1978: 241–45, 452–57). The advent of a prophet necessarily has political implications since such a figure always asserts a new, charismatic sort of authority within a society already ordered on traditional or rational bases. Moreover, within the text, the persecution of the prophet by the king is viewed as a transformation of God's inscrutable decree of suffering for his envoy. Simply by sending the Logos into the human world, God places him willy-nilly in jeopardy. The king punishes the prophet for ushering an alternative form of authority into his realm. On one level, the text presents the king as a transformation of (and functional equivalent to) God, which helps to explain why God is sometimes said to have delivered the holy figure into the tyrant's hands and sometimes to have himself decreed the prophet's death, as well as why the

persecutors are sometimes simply referred to as "enemies," without God's being mentioned at all. The structural identity of the persecutor, despite the different meanings attached to each, makes it possible to transform one into another. This passage may be diagrammed as follows:

Basic Opposition	First Triad	Second Triad
World of Immortality		
	The Testing God	
		Monarchical Authority
		Martyred Prophets
		Prophetic Authority
	Logos made Mortal	
	Mortal Humans	
World of Death		

We begin with the central polarity between the eternal realm of God and the world of death. This implicit opposition is first encountered in a reformulation in which the Logos, or prophetic intermediary, bridges the two worlds. Thus, we have a personal God, his people, and, between them, the High Prophets. These prophets partake of the divine insofar as they have visions and some knowledge of the nature of God. But they partake of the human world insofar as they can, unlike God, be persecuted, imprisoned, or killed. They mediate between the two realms. God is depicted as testing or assaying his Word by manifesting him on the plane of bloodthirsty human beings, who persecute him.

The first triad, of testing God, suffering prophet, and mortal humans, is now restated and transformed into a second triad. Here, it is said that kings oppress the prophets. This statement plays the same structural role as the image of the testing God, but carries a slightly different message. It conveys, rather, the conflict between secular domination and prophetic authority, a conflict apparently resolved by the prophet's imprisonment or death. Of course, the ability of human beings to persecute the emissaries of God despite their special relationship with the divine poses a contradiction. Explaining why the messiah was put to death rather than coming to power was a major task of early Christian apologists. Baha'u'llah likewise had to address the question of why the Bab, as the Mahdi or promised one of Islam, was executed instead of establishing a Babi state (Baha'u'llah 1970: 106–13; 1900: 86–88). First, he averred that "sovereignty" refers to spiritual authority rather than actual political domination and, second, that genuine sovereignty is achieved by such figures in the long run, as their religions become established. But this is a rational argument; the text at hand uses the oxymoronic figure (combining two contra-

dictory images) of the murdered prophet/betrayed messiah precisely
in order to synthesize the conflicting images of the royal scepter and
the prophetic staff.

The text speaks not about one prophet, but about all of them, em-
phasizing the structural and spiritual unity of all God's messengers
who have appeared in sacred history as well as (in this regard) the
minor prophets and the Imams who followed them. They have all
suffered from the same set of paradoxes and are ultimately, in meta-
phorical terms, identical. For this reason Baha'u'llah conjures up the
image of Imam Husayn, lying half-dead on Karbala's bloodstained
arid plain. The dying Imam speaks of himself as Abraham, Moses,
Joseph, John, and Jesus—all of whom came long before him—as well
as identifying himself with the Bab and Baha'u'llah, who arose nearly
twelve hundred years later. The logic of rational argumentation would
have to deny any such identification. These figures were all individual,
historical personalities, each with his own particular biography and
prophetic message and some of whom inspired discrete religions. In
religious terms, however, not only had the Koran already identified
many of these figures as prophets in a single line sent by God, but
the Iranian tradition of passion plays and ritual elegies had also con-
nected, and bestowed a rhetorical unity on, many of them. It was to
the latter tradition that Baha'u'llah appealed, employing the logic of
spirituality very early in his independent ministry to emphasize his
identity with all the prophets and holy figures of the past. By means of
such techniques as addressing an apostrophe to God, Baha'u'llah em-
phasized his status as a visionary to his audience, and, by employing an
unusual combination of first-person narrative and past-tense presen-
tation, he de-emphasized diachrony (linear time) to convey a sense of
synchrony (simultaneity) in sacred history. Casting the prophets' biog-
raphies in similar form, with similar structures, further underlined
the unity of all earlier messengers of God and founders of religions.

Identity and Sacrifice

Baha'u'llah expounded the unity of the holy figures in universal sacred
history in more than one manner, with more than one deep-structural
message. The passage considered above focused on the testing and
suffering of the prophets, a common theme in Iranian spirituality
that dominated passion plays and learned commentary alike. Another
prominent theme in these religious genres was redemptive sacrifice,
a subject that Baha'u'llah also addressed. One such passage will allow
us to consider not only another theme concerning religious unity, but
also how Baha'i thinkers dealt with discrepancies among scriptural tra-
ditions. As noted above, Baha'u'llah affirmed the textual integrity of
the Bible and the Koran alike. While most Muslims read the Koran as

questioning the reality of the Crucifixion, Baha'u'llah's interpretation allowed him to accept the Gospel accounts in this regard and others. Such different doctrines or ways of viewing events in sacred history make the religions seem incompatible with one another in terms of the logic of argumentation. Spiritual logic, however, with its focus on structures, archetypes, and symbols rather than surface detail, can devalue such differences.

The story of God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice his eldest son, Isaac, then finally granting him a reprieve has gripped the religious imagination of the Abrahamic traditions for at least three thousand, and perhaps as many as four thousand, years. It has been read in myriad ways, from Hegel's depiction of Abraham as a symbol of the alienated state of believers before the advent of Christ to Kierkegaard's portrayal of him in *Fear and Trembling* as the "paradigm of authenticity" (Kierkegaard 1970 [1944]; Taylor 1982: 2). An undated text by Baha'u'llah also treats the Abraham incident, but in terms of redemptive suffering.

> That which thou hast heard concerning Abraham, the Friend of the All-Merciful, is the truth, and no doubt is there about it. The Voice of God commanded Him to offer up Ishmael as a sacrifice, so that His steadfastness in the Faith of God and His detachment from all else but Him may be demonstrated unto men. The purpose of God, moreover, was to sacrifice him as a ransom for the sins and iniquities of all the peoples of the earth. This same honor, Jesus, the Son of Mary, besought the one true God, exalted be his name and glory, to confer upon Him. For the same reason was Husayn offered up as a sacrifice by Muhammad, the Apostle of God.
>
> No man can ever claim to have comprehended the nature of the hidden and manifold grace of God; none can fathom His all-embracing mercy. Such hath been the perversity of men and their transgressions, so grievous have been the trials that have afflicted the Prophets of God and their chosen ones, that all mankind deserveth to be tormented and to perish. God's hidden and most loving providence, however, hath, through both visible and invisible agencies, protected and will continue to protect it from the penalty of its wickedness. Ponder this in thine heart, that the truth may be revealed unto thee, and be thou steadfast in His path.   (Baha'u'llah 1982: 75–76; 1984: 56)

The Western reader will be struck by the substitution of "Ishmael" for "Isaac" here, and this is a matter to which I will return. First, however, I want to discuss the substance of the text.

Here the common identity of Abraham's son, of Jesus, and of the Imam Husayn is not stressed as much as the identical meaning of their sacrifices. The generic framework here is epistolary, and the author uses mediated narration, mixing second- and third-person voice, present and past tense. The passage does allude to, and play upon, the resonances of Iranian passion plays and mourning cere-

monies for the Imams. Baha'u'llah's purpose here was not to assert
again his own identity with the previous Manifestations of God, so
he did not employ the first-person voice. We must remember that the
Surah of Blood was intended as a proclamation of his status as a High
Prophet. This text, however, was written much later and presumes the
acceptance of his doctrinal authority among the Baha'is. Note that it
is not important for the logic of this passage that Jesus and Husayn
died, while Abraham's son did not, for Abraham's story is still about
the sacrifice of holy persons. Moreover, reading these three stories
against one another brings out similar elements that would otherwise
remain only implicit. Baha'u'llah says that Abraham's near sacrifice
functioned both as a demonstration of his steadfastness and detach-
ment and as a ritual offering that expunged human guilt. Abraham's
action is depicted in Genesis only as a test of his commitment to God,
and there is no indication that the act had a salvific component. But
the form in which Abraham's action was cast is precisely that of a
ritual sacrifice undertaken to appease an angry God. That the God of
Genesis accepted the willingness to sacrifice in place of an actual kill-
ing does not affect the structure of the story, which remains centered
on using sacrifice to avert divine displeasure. Abraham's ordeal can
plausibly be read as similar in this regard to the Gospel narratives on
Jesus' Passion.

The Apostle Paul, of course, also suggested parallels (Romans 4:19–
25) between Abraham and Christ, comparing Abraham's old age and
barrenness to Christ's death on the cross and thus implying that God's
gift of a son to Abraham anticipated Christ's Resurrection (Patte 1983:
216–21). Paul compared Isaac's birth to the Passion and Resurrection,
whereas Baha'u'llah compared the threatened sacrifice of Abraham's
son to the same events. Both comparisons depend on transformations.
Since the biography of Abraham demonstrates structural transforma-
tions within itself, it is not surprising that two authors could compare
two different episodes in his biography to the same third event, Christ's
Crucifixion and Resurrection. For the tales of the miraculous birth
of a son to an aged Abraham and of his near sacrifice years later
already show many functional similarities. An aged couple is to the
birth of a son as a divine demand for sacrifice is to the sparing of a life.
Baha'u'llah then assimilates a third story from universal sacred his-
tory, the popular Shiite version of Husayn's martyrdom, to the pattern
of sacrifice and salvation. Given the Shiite conviction that the simple
act of weeping for the slain scion of the Prophet's House is enough
to earn eternal salvation, the parallels to Christian belief are obvious
enough.

This later text, like the Surah of Blood, draws attention to the struc-
tural resemblances among the various meaningful stories in the Abra-

hamic traditions. Baha'u'llah, by juxtaposing these stories, brings out deep structures that show the narratives to have the same basic plot. The account of Abraham, however much it might be about steadfastness and obedience to God, is also about sacrifice—or, in Kierkegaard's phrase, "infinite resignation" (Kierkegaard 1970 [1944]: 56). The Prophet is said to have sacrificed his grandson Husayn just as Abraham was prepared to kill his son. Since Muhammad had been dead for nearly fifty years when Husayn rebelled against the Umayyads, the phrasing here is the result of seeing history through the lens of spiritual logic. Abraham had a son whom God ordered him to kill; God had a son who allowed himself to be sacrificed; Muhammad had a grandson whose martyrdom he could not prevent. Baha'u'llah's text treats these narratives as links on a chain, as repeated transformations of one and the same plot. This plot, in all three of its versions, is seen as existentially meaningful, as conveying a message about human suffering and divine forgiveness.

Let us turn now to the problem of the discrepancy between the biblical and Muslim traditions concerning the identity of the son whom Abraham nearly sacrificed. The Koran (37:101–7), it should be noted, does not state the name of the son. Early Muslim commentators were divided over this issue: one group accepted the Genesis identification of the son as Isaac, but another insisted that it was Ishmael who was nearly offered up. On the whole, popular Muslim belief tended to side with the faction that identified the sacrifice (*dhabih*) as Ishmael, and this was certainly the case in the Iranian passion plays (Bashear 1990; Forough [n.d.]). The problem of the differing Judeo-Christian and Muslim versions of the Abraham story was addressed by Baha'u'llah's son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Baha'. He asserted that every human being is, in an existential sense, identical to the "sacrifice" (*dhabih*, i.e., the imperiled son of Abraham):

> Each is a sacrifice, all are offerings in the divine path, all have hastened to the altar of ecstatic love. For that reason, Isaac and Ishmael are both sacrifices, as are all the servants of God. This is a station that is among the exigencies of divine unity. From this it follows that in the station of divine unity Ishmael and Isaac are considered as one being, and it is permissible to apply the appellation of each to the other. In the Pentateuch, Isaac is specified; in some of the oral reports attributed to the Prophet [Muhammad] Isaac is mentioned, whereas in others it is Ishmael. I earlier referred to Ishmael in accordance with the common parlance of the people, since the name of Ishmael is upon the tongues of the followers of the Qur'an. ('Abdu'l-Baha' 1912: 328–30)

From a semiotic point of view, both "Isaac" and "Ishmael," as words, are simply arbitrary signs which are given meaning only within a semantic system. The Isaac of Genesis had four primary meanings for

believers of the Hebrew Bible: (1) /Isaac/ was the historical person-
age; (2) /Isaac/ was a son of Abraham; (3) /Isaac/ was a progenitor
of the faithful, to whom divine promises had been made; and (4)
/Isaac/ was an archetypal symbol of the believer's willingness to make
sacrifices for God. The third meaning, of Isaac as progenitor, posed
problems for the post–Judaic Abrahamic religions of Christianity and
Islam since this genealogical sense could not be carried over to the
new faith. The Christians solved this dilemma by seeing themselves as
symbolic descendants of Isaac. Some Muslims, especially in the first
centuries of Islam, appear to have adopted a similar tactic. But since
Arabs believed themselves descended from Ishmael, the most direct
manner in which they could appropriate the three existentially central
meanings of the sign /Isaac/ was to replace it with the sign /Ishmael/.
The integration of the Abrahamic sacrifice story to the Arab-Islamic
milieu required Muslims either to affirm the first, literal meaning of
/Isaac/ as historical personage and allow the tale's existential import to
be blunted or to retain the latter three (and most meaningful) senses
of /Isaac/ by reassigning them, as it were, to /Ishmael/. In the end, at
least in the popular tradition, the second choice won out.

   ʿAbduʾl-Baha's explanation of the discrepancy, which affirms the
spiritual validity of both approaches, has a background in Islamic
and Iranian mysticism, and it clearly depends upon a philosophical
nominalism similar to that which underlies modern formalism, struc-
turalism, and semiotics. If we consider the influence of ancient Greek
and medieval Muslim nominalist schools on both Iranian religion and
medieval European ideas, we may be able to delineate a common
genealogy for the Baha'i and the postmodern semiotic approaches to
mythic structures. In both traditions, a sign is not statically attached
to an actual external referent, but rather is an arbitrary pointing de-
vice. In any case, the convergence appears to me to be striking. French
anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1983) has taught us that all
important stories exist in several versions and that all versions of the
mythos are equally "true," carrying the same latent message. From
this point of view, clearly, the biblical Hebrew story and the Muslim-
Arab story are both "true" versions of the same narrative; it is irrele-
vant whether Isaac or Ishmael was the intended victim since each is
merely a sign that could be attached to the more basic function /son/.
Substituting one for the other is simply an instance of transformation.

   This text raises the problem of multiple versions of stories in the
Abrahamic traditions. The redactions of the biblical text have elimi-
nated many alternative versions of these stories, but by expanding our
own view to noncanonical texts, such as the Haggadah, and to other
Abrahamic traditions, such as Islam, we can see that other versions
have been told. Bahaʾuʾllah, by setting this story in the same context

as the passion of Christ and the martyrdom of Husayn, focuses atten-
tion on the theme of sacrifice and redemption and thus de-emphasizes
the genealogical and political implications of the narrative. From the
point of view of modern historical scholarship, in any case, neither
the historicity of the account nor the genealogy it proposes could be
accepted without question since tribal peoples are notorious for manu-
facturing connected lineages in order to foment ideological unity, even
where no biological relationship actually existed. The importance of
the story for the world religions and for world literature, however,
does not depend on the facticity of its genealogical or historical details
(although I do not wish to deny a historical core to the account), but
on its spiritual meaning.

   Although the basic approach in this passage, that is, of identifying
figures in sacred history as transformations of one another, is the same
as that taken in the Surah of Blood, the message here has to do with
sacrifice and salvation rather than with the suffering of the righteous
prophet. The story in the Surah of Blood was told from the point of
view of the prophet, whereas the perspective here relates to the story's
significance for the audience, and the discursive technique of medi-
ated narrative is adopted. The juxtaposition of these materials is not as
commonplace in Islamic culture as might be assumed. Neither the Ten
Sessions nor the passion plays of Iran ever included a dramatization of
Jesus' death since popular Islam tended, in docetic fashion, to deny the
Crucifixion. Baha'u'llah nevertheless drew on this Gospel narrative
tradition in both of the passages we have discussed. The willingness
to see New Testament texts as authoritative scripture distinguishes
Baha'u'llah's writings on the unity of the prophets from the vast ma-
jority of commentary in the Islamic tradition; here, he employs simple
quotation or paraphrase as a technique to underline the scriptural
unity of the world religions (cf. Parrinder 1965; Collins 1976). Any-
one who has read large numbers of Islamic theological treatises cannot
but be struck by the new intertextuality deployed by Baha'u'llah in the
Book of Certitude and other works where verses from the Hebrew Bible,
the New Testament, the Koran, and the Bab's Bayan are all quoted as
scripture and embedded in Islamic conventions usually reserved solely
for Koranic verses. The application of widely accepted Iranian literary
and religious conventions, such as those concerning the mourning of
Husayn and Abraham's sacrifice, to unconventional subject matter like
the Crucifixion, or the juxtaposition, elsewhere, of Shiite and Chris-
tian eschatology with Zoroastrian, allows Baha'u'llah to be innovative
and to extend the range of accepted sacred history while nevertheless
naturalizing this new material for his immediate audience of Iranian
Muslims. Baha'i thinkers such as 'Abdu'l-Baha' self-consciously saw
alternative textual traditions within the Abrahamic religions as equally

valid versions of an underlying mythos and as transformations in an
almost Proppian and Lévi-Straussian sense.

Conclusion

I implied above that philosophers of religion, when considering such
issues as theological pluralism, have tended to draw abstract proposi-
tions from religious texts and then to treat those propositions in the
same way that mathematical propositions would be treated. My argu-
ment here has been that such a procedure ignores the literariness,
the *textuality*, of religious texts. It also, of course, ignores some essen-
tial components of religion, such as cultus, history, symbol, and affect
or right-brain thinking. Here, I have asked a different sort of ques-
tion, not whether religions make conflicting truth-claims in the form
of abstract propositions, but rather how religious pluralism is made
meaningful to those who believe in it. Providing an answer to this
question, I suggest, requires that we pay attention to the poetics of
scriptural and theological language in such pluralist traditions as the
Baha'i faith, some schools of Hinduism and Buddhism, some orders
of Sufi Islam, and some Christian and Jewish theology.

In the first text considered here, the Surah of Blood, one of
Baha'u'llah's earliest declarations of his status as a world messiah, I
demonstrated that several literary techniques were used in conjunc-
tion with an appeal to a set of conventions. The Shiite passion plays
had already established a dramatic tradition of intertextuality, with
the sacrifice of Abraham, the travels of Joseph, the assassination of the
prophet's son-in-law ʿAli, and the martyrdom of Husayn all enacted
together. The Ten Sessions, or prose readings conducted during the
mourning month of Muharram, employed similar conventions to com-
memorate these tragedies of sacred history. Baha'u'llah appealed to
these conventions by setting a scene in which the dying Husayn directs
his plaint to the heavens, identifying himself with Abraham, Joseph,
Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah himself. The
use of the first-person voice throughout this passage, enabling Husayn
to speak as Moses, as John the Baptist, and as Baha'u'llah, contra-
vened the convention whereby such texts were typically structured as
a mediated narration in the past tense. The introduction of the first-
person voice and present-tense subjectivity underlined the unity of
these prophetic or holy figures. The retelling of their stories so as to
emphasize their similar plot structure further reinforced the impres-
sion of unity, as did the reiterated opposition of governmental and
hierocratic authority to the power of the charismatic prophet. Finally,
the introduction of an apostrophe to God set Baha'u'llah's voice apart
and helped naturalize his claims to a special relationship with the
divine, just as a poet's use of this technique helps establish his or her

voice as visionary, as proceeding from extraordinary insight into the natural world.

In the second text considered here, Baha'u'llah compared the sacrifices of Isaac/Ishmael, Jesus, and Husayn, establishing in this thematic manner an unusual intertextuality among Pentateuch, New Testament, and Koran. The surface contradictions among these Abrahamic scriptural traditions, such as the dispute over whether Isaac or Ishmael was the potential sacrifice, were addressed by Baha'i leaders, such as ʿAbdu'l-Baha', in a manner greatly resembling the transformations identified by contemporary students of myth, such as Lévi-Strauss. Thus it could be asserted that, upon the epistemological plane of divine unity (*tawhid*), Isaac and Ishmael are equivalent and that the story's significance lies in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. In affirming the Crucifixion of Christ and the inspired character of the New Testament generally, Baha'u'llah broke with the majority Muslim position that the New Testament, in its existing form, is corrupt and is not identical to the "Evangelium" (*Injil*) praised in the Koran. The simple literary juxtaposition of the Crucifixion with the martyrdom of Husayn, employing the Persian conventions of mourning for the slain Imam, not only naturalized this Christian motif within a semiotic system shaped by Iranian Islam, but also implied that the traditional mainstream Muslim rejection of the existing New Testament was based on no obvious Koranic imperative.

John Hick's theological pluralism reflects a Kantian epistemology. He asserts that, just as we have no direct perception of phenomena, but rather impose preexisting conceptual categories on the world to organize it, so do we have no immediate knowledge of the numinous. Religions, in this view, represent human responses to a divinity sensed but not directly known, and therefore the differences among the religions are due in part to the use of preexisting cultural categories to conceptualize the holy. Structuralism and semiotics likewise have a Kantian ancestry, and, perhaps for that reason, they seem likely to provide further means of elaborating Hick's conclusions. The procedure of abstracting creedal propositions from the various religions and then opposing these to one another represents a "thin" reading of religious meaning. Only by examining underlying mythic structures, and the contours of scriptural and theological textuality, can we begin to make sense of religious pluralism.

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