

***How Bahá'u'lláh Taught Christians:
The Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings
To Followers of Jesus Christ***

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In order to gather a body of believers that would concretely exemplify the unity of the world's various faiths, the message of Baha'u'llah had to go beyond verbal affirmations of the oneness of religion. Members of those various religions would have to accept the station of Baha'u'llah and join the Bahá'í community. Christianity, as the world's largest and most wide-spread religion, could not be ignored.

How did Baha'u'llah present His message, which had arisen in an Islamic context, so as to attract and persuade Christians? How did He go about declaring His station so that Christians could identify with it? How direct and explicit were the proclamations? What information and strategies were used to prepare His audience? How were appeals to heart, mind and conscience orchestrated? How were prejudices overcome? What proofs did He marshal? In what order were the proofs presented? What poetic or rhetorical devices were employed? How was the presentation shaped to effectively persuade and win converts to His Cause?

In addition to its historical and academic value, it is hoped that this study will have practical value for teachers of the Bahá'í Faith. A detailed examination of Baha'u'llah's teaching methods should provide important guidance as to how the message of Baha'u'llah can best be presented to Christians today.

Before examining specific texts, I'd like to clarify what I mean by rhetoric and pedagogy in this context. Rhetoric is the use of persuasive language to convince. While any attempt at persuasion makes use of rhetorical devices, figures of speech, and structure of main points and sub-points, the term particularly applies to discourse about specific issues and constitutes the techniques and means utilized for winning over others to one's position in a debate. In his writings to non-Bahá'í audiences, Baha'u'llah's proposition, the issue at stake, is primarily the recognition of Himself as God's messenger.

Pedagogy is a more general term that describes instructional methods of a teacher with a less focused goal. A teacher uses various techniques to convey broad information on a topic, with the goal of, not only imparting specific information but also training the mind, developing critical thinking and analytical skills and ultimately uplifting the student. Baha'u'llah's pedagogic goals likewise extend beyond simple

recognition of His Mission. He seeks to familiarize His reader with the basic tenets of His Revelation and ultimately to transform souls, to educate, to uplift, to advance the development of spiritual capacities, to inculcate the love of God, to encourage detachment from all else.

Based on the Baha'is belief in Bahá'u'lláh as an embodiment of all divine qualities, it makes good sense for Baha'is to look to Bahá'u'lláh as the exemplary model of "Teacher." Good teaching depends upon spiritual virtues, such as love, wisdom and patience. In examining Bahá'u'lláh's teaching methodology, we want to know how he framed His message so as to attract Christian hearts. How did He establish common ground? What rhetorical tactics did He use to persuade? Beside the ultimate goal of recognition of Himself as the Manifestation of God for this day, what intermediate goals did he set? What pedagogic strategies does He use to open the path toward transformation?

Source Materials

What source materials are available to address our topic? A substantial number of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets contain materials specifically addressed to Christians, although not all are available in translation. From the Adrianople period, partial translations exist of several tablets to the kings are addressed to Christian monarchs. Gleanings CXVI, contains a passage from Suriy-i-Muluk circa 1867. Another passage from the same Tablet, addressed to the French ambassador, is paraphrased both in Revelation of Baha'u'llah v.2 p305-325, and God Passes By p174. A brief quotation from the First Tablet to Napoleon is found in part in Promised Day Has Come p51-52.

A most valuable source from the Akka period is Lawh-i-Aqdas, popularly known as the Tablet to the Christians. Also from this same period, we have complete or mostly complete translations of several relevant tablets published in Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh, including the second tablet to Napoleon III, and tablets to Pope Pius IX, Queen Victoria of England, Czar Alexander II of Russia and others.

Suriy-i-Muluk

A rhetorical analysis of the pre-Akka tablets is hampered by the lack of complete translations. For Suriy-i-Muluk, a substantial portion of the text can be assembled in translation. Large passages are found in 6 sections in Gleanings, several long passages in The Promised Day Has Come and an long passage in Proclamation of Baha'u'llah. Unfortunately we or at least I could not learn in what order these various sections appeared in the Arabic original. Accordingly, it was not possible to outline the Tablet or to reconstruct sequence of Bahá'u'lláh's themes.

What Shoghi Effendi has given us in Gleanings CXVI, is apparently the heart of the statement addressed to the Christian kings in Suriy-i-Muluk. Several rhetorical and pedagogic features can be seen in this passage which are typical of Baha'u'llah's proclamations.

- The use of exuberant, poetic language
- The use of the 2nd person to directly address and engage the reader.
- The use of questions to engage the reader.
- The use of Christian scripture and terminology.
- Gradual introduction of Bahá'í concepts and terminology, e.g. "Spirit of God" as a name for Jesus in preparation for Bahá'í interpretations to be offered later.
- Chastisement for immoral and irreligious acts and attitudes.
- Non-specific proclamation stating that Christ has returned without specific identification of Bahá'u'lláh's role as the promised one.
- Chastisement for failure to recognize the returned Christ implying a moral obligation to do so.

Now, let's take a look at how these techniques are embodied in the text. Consider first a passage from the Tablets to the Kings (Suriy-i-Muluk).

"O kings of Christendom! Heard ye not the saying of Jesus, the Spirit of God, "I go away, and come again unto you"? Wherefore, then, did ye fail, when He did come again unto you in the clouds of heaven, to draw nigh unto Him, that ye might behold His face, and be of them that attained His Presence? In another passage He saith: "When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth." And yet, behold how, when He did bring the truth, ye refused to turn your faces towards Him, and persisted in disporting yourselves with your pastimes and fancies. Ye welcomed Him not, neither did ye seek His Presence, that ye might hear the verses of God from His own mouth, and partake of the manifold wisdom of the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise. Ye have, by reason of your failure, hindered the breath of God from being wafted over you, and have withheld from your souls the sweetness of its fragrance. Ye continue roving with delight in the valley of your corrupt desires. Ye, and all ye possess, shall pass away. Ye shall, most certainly, return to God, and shall be called to account for your doings in the presence of Him Who shall gather together the entire creation... (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXVI p. 246-7)

Phrase by Phrase Analysis

"O kings of Christendom! Heard ye not the saying of Jesus, the Spirit of God, "I go away, and come again unto you"?"

Bahá'u'lláh directly addresses the kings, speaks to them in the second person and further engages them by asking a question, “Heard ye not the saying...?”

Bahá'u'lláh's question contains a paraphrase from a well-known Gospel verse, John 14:2-3. In the NKJV, it reads: “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself...” By referring to Christian scripture, Bahá'u'lláh lays the groundwork for His claim to be the Promised One of the New Testament.

In Islamic literature Jesus is often referred to by the Arabic nickname “Rouhullah”, meaning “the Spirit of God.” which is sometimes abbreviated “Rouh,” meaning simply “the Spirit.” The nickname has its root in the Qur’anic verse, “Christ Jesus the son of Mary was an apostle of God ... and a spirit proceeding from Him” (4:171). Yet to call Jesus the Spirit of God would most certainly seem strange to a Christian reader. Since the third century, Christian theology, under various Trinitarian creeds, explicitly distinguished between the three persons; Father, Son and Spirit. As such the Son could hardly be referred to as the Spirit of God. Yet no Christian would deny that Christ is “spirit” (John 3:3-8) or that He is “of God.” (John 1:1) One of Baha’u’llah’s reasons for adopting the Islamic term in this context apparently lies in building a bridge between Islamic and Christian conceptions.

Bahá'u'lláh's introduction of Spirit of God as a name for Christ also anticipates Christian counter-arguments concerning the identity of the “comforter” spoken of in John chapters 14-16. In those chapters a number of statements are made about the coming of a Promised One or Comforter who would progressively reveal “all truth”. In John 14:26, the helper is called the “Holy Spirit.” John 16:12-13 further states, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He the spirit of truth, He will guide you into all truth.”

Muslims have long interpreted those verses as applying to Muhammad. (Qur’an 61:6) Bahá'í Writings apply both of these verses to the all the later Manifestations of God, including Muhammad, the Bab and Baha’u’llah. (Iqan 21-22; Baha’is World Faith 15: God Passes By 210.)

Christians have countered that the promise applies only to the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and deny that the term "Holy Spirit" could refer to a human prophet. Baha’u’llah, by calling Jesus “the Spirit”, tangentially addresses this issue. He asserts that Jesus was “the Spirit” and implicitly claims that future human Manifestations of the Spirit of God could likewise be called “the Spirit.” Thus the Christian objection is neutralized.

Wherefore, then, did ye fail, when He did come again unto you in the clouds of heaven, to draw nigh unto Him, that ye might behold His face, and be of them that attained His Presence?

Here the claim is made that Christ has returned. Those who already familiar with the claims of the Bab and Baha'u'llah, this may seem like a pretty straight forward statement. However, for those hearing the claim for the first time, the words are not so clear. Note that the statement is in the third person, "He did come again" and no explanation is forthcoming about how the promise was fulfilled. We might call this non-specific proclamation that invites inquiries from sincere seekers. Similarly, Baha'u'llah simply states that He came "in the clouds of heaven" but does not here explain how that was so.

This technique of gradual unfoldment is similar in many ways to the manner in which Jesus revealed Himself. Christ did not publicly claim to be the Messiah. rather He asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter is the one who announces Christ's station by responding, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Thereafter Jesus affirms Peter's conclusion.

Naturally the uninitiated reader of the third person statements in this passage in Suriy-i-Muluk, would wonder what was meant. Where was the returned Lord? How and when did He arrive? Presumably sincere ones would be motivated to investigate and to ask questions. Likely the purpose of such veiled statements was, was not simply to state Baha'u'llah's claim, but to draw the reader into further discussion.

The spiritual benefits of recognizing the returned Christ are alluded to as "beholding his face" and "attaining His presence." (Compare 1 Corinthians 13:12) Christian theology has long held out the Beatific Vision as the ultimate reward for living the righteous life. The expectation was, however, that this reward would be granted in a heavenly afterlife. The concept of a face-to-face vision of the Presence of the Lord while alive in the flesh is not prevalent in Christian thought. Here Baha'u'llah gently introduces a new idea which has natural appeal. Who would not want to see the glory of God and gain this ultimate reward here and now? Thus the reader is gradually moved toward a Bahá'í perspective, a mystical one, on the nature of communing with God.

Significantly, Bahá'u'lláh offers a mildly worded rebuke for failing to recognize the returned Christ when He asks, "Wherefore did ye fail... to draw nigh unto Him?" meaning the Returned Christ. His manner is reminiscent of Christ's rebukes. "O ye of little faith" (Matthew 16:9);

"Get behind me, Satan." (Matthew 16:23); "O ye of little faith" (Matthew 16:9).

In another passage He said:

"When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth." And yet, behold how, when He did bring the truth, ye refused to turn your faces towards Him, and persisted in disporting yourselves with your pastimes and fancies. Ye welcomed Him not, neither did ye seek His Presence, that ye might hear the verses of God from His own mouth, and partake of the manifold wisdom of the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise.

Baha'u'llah quotes a second verse about the coming Comforter from the Gospel of John (16:12-14). Background has been laid for the identification of the Comforter with a human prophet by repeatedly referring to Christ as "the Spirit." The argument develops much as it did in the previous quote from John. The Gospel text is first paraphrased. The failure of the kings to recognize the fulfillment of the promise is reiterated. The benefits of recognition are restated and now amplified to include "hearing the verses of God from His own mouth" and "partaking of His wisdom."

Baha'u'llah also introduces here an Islamic / Bahá'í formulaic recitation of the names of God "the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise." This is another example demonstrating how Bahá'u'lláh helps the reader tune his ear to the language of the new revelation.

Ye continue roving with delight in the valley of your corrupt desires. Ye, and all ye possess, shall pass away. Ye shall, most certainly, return to God, and shall be called to account for your doings in the presence of Him Who shall gather together the entire creation... "

This section of Suriy-i-Muluk concludes with a rather harsh rebuke, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets like Elijah, Amos and others, who prophesied divine retribution for the spiritual errors of the kings and people. (1 Kings 21:17-24; Isaiah 1:2-31; Jeremiah 2:2-37; etc.) Baha'u'llah emphatically calls the kings to account for their "corrupt desires." They are destined for adverse judgment. They will die and be called into the Presence of the King of Eternity to account for their failure. A vivid contrast is created with the benevolent Presence of God available to them were they to turn to Baha'u'llah.

Other Writings to Christians

Other translated messages to Christians include a passage to the French Ambassador in Suriy-i-Muluk and a portion of the First Tablet to Napoleon. Although brief, these display similar teaching methodology. In them, Bahá'u'lláh quotes Christian scripture and administers warnings and reproofs.^{1 2}

¹ "The French Ambassador accredited to the Sublime Porte, He, in that same Súrah, rebukes for having combined with the Persian Ambassador against Him; reminds him of the counsels of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Gospel of St. John; warns him that he will be held answerable for the things his hands have wrought; and counsels him, together with those like him, not to deal with any one as he has dealt with Him." -- God Passes By, p. 174

² "Two statements graciously uttered by the king of the age have reached the ears of these wronged ones. These pronouncements are, in truth, the king of all pronouncements, the like of which have never been heard from any sovereign. The first was the answer given the Russian government when it inquired why the war [Crimean] was waged against it. Thou didst reply: 'The cry of the oppressed who, without guilt or blame, were drowned in the Black Sea wakened me at dawn. Wherefore, I took up arms against thee.' These oppressed ones, however, have suffered a greater wrong, and are in greater distress. Whereas the trials inflicted upon those people lasted but one day, the troubles borne by these servants have continued for twenty and five years, every moment of which has held for us a grievous affliction. The other weighty statement, which was indeed a wondrous statement, manifested to the world, was this: 'Ours is the responsibility to avenge the oppressed and succor the helpless.' The fame of the Emperor's justice and fairness hath brought hope to a great many souls. It beseemeth the king of the age to inquire into the condition of such as have been wronged, and it behooveth him to

From the latter Akka period, English translations are available for several complete letters to the kings of Christendom. These likewise display a consistent set of rhetorical devices including: use of exuberant, engaging language citation of Christian scripture, non-specific proclamation of Christ returned and chastisement.

In His second letter to Napoleon, Baha'u'llah alludes repeatedly to past scripture, particularly prophecies about the return of Christ. "All the tribes of the earth have mourned" (Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7), "the foundations of the cities have trembled" (revelation 16:18-19), "the stars of the heaven of knowledge have fallen" (Matthew 24:29). He again uses veiled language to refer to Himself as the return of Christ, "He who is the Unconditioned is come in the clouds of light."

In the second letter to Napoleon, Jesus is likewise identified as the "Spirit of God" although no reference is made to the relevant verses in the Gospel of John. Chastisement is found in Baha'u'llah's rebuke of Napoleon for "his own passions," for "casting behind thy back the Book of God." He is bidden to accept the "breezes of forgiveness" lest the thing he possesses be taken away.

As the kings were reminded in Suriy-i-Muluk that death would bring accountability, here Napoleon is instructed to contemplate his mortality and ultimate answerability to God. "Whither are gone the proud and their palaces? Gaze thou into their tombs that thou mayest profit by their example..." When He sets out the rewards for heeding God's call, Baha'u'llah alludes to two of His fundamental teachings, namely the spiritual resurrection and the oneness of mankind... He states, "...that He may quicken all things with the breeze of His Name... and unify the world."

In the Tablet to the Russian Czar, we once again find a similar rhetorical pattern. Past scripture is referenced with "Isaiah," the "Torah" and the "Evangel" being specifically named.

Anticipating a Christian counter-argument to His claims, Bahá'u'lláh raises the issue of the veil of names. Christians are accustomed to speaking of the Lord using only one name, Jesus Christ. In order to appreciate the oneness of religion and the station of Baha'u'llah, the Christian readers will need to broaden their understanding on this point. Thus Baha'u'llah writes, "Be not of them who called upon God by one of His names, but who, when He who is the object of all names appeared, denied Him and turned aside from Him, and in the end, pronounced sentence against Him with manifest injustice." Thus a warning is given that adherence to one name of God, could lead to rejection of and persecution of the returned Christ.

In the letter to the Pope, the same themes appear with appropriate modification due to the religious character of the Papal office. Baha'u'llah compares the people's rejection of Him with the rejection of

Jesus by the Pharisees. Further, He amplifies the description of Himself as the returned Christ more completely than He does when addressing other kings. He further develops the veil of names theme by indicating that the monks have secluded themselves in their churches in His (Baha'u'llah's) Name. Indicating that His Name and Christ's Name are equivalent.

To the Pope, Baha'u'llah is very specific about the return of the Son in a human form and makes as direct a self-identification as we will find. "The Word which the Son concealed is made manifest. It hath been sent down in the form of a human temple in this day." By a graphic comparison with the crucifixion, Baha'u'llah links Himself with Christ's sacrifice for the sins of mankind. "My body longeth for the cross, and my head waiteth for the thrust of the spear ... that the world may be purged from its transgressions."

Letters to Kings a Special Case?

The Tablets we have been discussing so far were addressed to powerful rulers, who might be considered more accountable to God than ordinary folk. How did Baha'u'llah's presentation vary when he addressed ordinary Christians? Did He vary His approach? Use less scripture? Are the chastisements for misconduct and failure to recognize the returned Christ as direct and blunt?

To answer those questions, let's look at two tablets that were written to broader Christian audiences. One is the Tablet to the Clergy and Peoples of Various Faiths (generally published with the letters to the kings) and the other is the Tablet to the Christians (Lawh-i-Aqdas).

Tablet to the Clergy and Peoples of Various Faiths

In the introduction of the Tablet to the Clergy and Peoples of Various Faiths, we find a wonderfully concise paragraph that encapsulates Baha'u'llah's way of teaching.

At one time We address the people of the Torah and summon them unto Him Who is the Revealer of verses, Who hath come from Him Who layeth low the necks of men.... At another, We address the people of the Evangel and say: 'The All-Glorious is come in this Name whereby the Breeze of God hath wafted over all regions.'... At still another, We address the people of the Qur'an saying: 'Fear the All-Merciful, and cavil not at Him through Whom all religions were founded.' (Proclamation of Baha'u'llah, p. 87)

In this passage, Baha'u'llah skillfully weaves reference to each of the Holy Books and incorporates concepts which are fundamental to the beliefs of each religious group. Yet He couches those thoughts in terms grounded in His own Revelation.

One of the outstanding rhetorical features of this passage is the rapid fire series of statements to three religious groups, Jews, Christians and Muslims. The syntactic parallelism places all three faiths on a

shared field as recipients of the divine call. The threefold repetition of the phrase, “we address the people of the Torah,” “we address the people of the Evangel,” “we address the people of the Qur’an” classifies all as peoples with a common heritage. All worship One God who communicates through a human messengers and who leaves behind an inspired book. This formulation aids the reader to group the peoples of the book in a common category and suggests the Oneness of Religion.

As to Baha’u’llah’s choice of concept and terminology: The Jews are called “the people of the Torah” a variant of the phrase “people of the Book” which is found over a dozen times in the Qur’an in reference to Jews and Christians. (See Qur’an 2:101 and sundry). The substitution of “Torah” for “book” transforms the phrase into one that refers to Jews only.

Note the phrase “Revealer of verses.” While the concept of inspiration is a basic tenet of Judaism, the phrase is not one that Jews would readily identify as being Jewish. Its closest approximation may be Daniel’s reference to God as “Revealer of secrets” (Daniel 2:47). The substitution of the term “verses” for the term “secrets” may reflect the Islamic and Bahá’í belief that the ability to produce sublime poetry is an evidence of divine inspiration. The phrase is also found in the Aqdas (21) and Tablets of Baha’u’llah (198).

Clearly, “Revealer of Verses” is a Bahá’í term rather than a Jewish one. It is an example of the consistently Bahá’í character of Bahá’u’lláh’s language. His use of Jewish terms is not so complete that a reader could think He was Jewish. Similarly His use of Christian and Muslim terms does not go so far as to make Him sound like a Christian or Muslim. Rather, the weaving together of phrases and references to the past on a clearly Bahá’í foundation serves to create a fusion consistent with Bahá’í principles. The new revelation is a unique creation that incorporates the spirit of past Dispensations, but is nevertheless new and distinct. It is not merely the melting together of various old traditions but the recasting of them into a new and vibrant Cause. In sync with that theme, Bahá’u’lláh’s words allude to older Dispensations, but always remain distinctly Bahá’í.

Baha’u’llah’s allusion to God as the one who “layeth low the necks of men” is a reference to Deuteronomy 21:37 where Israel is described as a stubborn, stiff-necked people. One may wonder why Baha’u’llah opens with such a critic of Jewish rebelliousness. Yet this technique corresponds to the basic Bahá’í tenet that the old order must be disrupted before the new order can be built. Exposure of the veils which block recognition of Baha’u’llah are forthrightly dealt with, even if such has a measure of “sting” to it. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the critic is not direct and is set in traditional symbolism, which has the effect of softening the blow.

Nevertheless, chastisement is a clear feature of Baha’u’llah’s message to this more general Christian audience, just as it was in the Tablets to the Kings, although here it is perhaps gentler and less direct.

When Baha'u'llah addresses the people of the Christian Evangel, He likewise uses Christian concepts and terms intermixed with uniquely Bahá'í terms. Christ is called the All-Glorious. The New Testament speaks of Christ's return in "glory," but the phrase All-Glorious has a distinct Islamic or Bahá'í ring to it. Compare All-Wise, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Bountiful. Here again we find a fusion of terminology.

In this passage, Baha'u'llah tangentially raises the issues of the veil of names, when He states the "All-Glorious One has come in this Name..." It is natural to wonder, however, how many readers, unfamiliar with the issue, would get the point. The issue is raised with greater clarity, as we have seen, in the Tablet to Czar Nicholas etc.

In His appeal to Muslims, Baha'u'llah refers to Himself as "one through whom all religions were founded." The Qur'an (29:46) states: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book... but say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)." Thus the concept of the Unity of Religion is well established in Islam. Although nominally addressed to Muslims, this phrase would be most striking to Jewish and Christian readers who would tend to see only their own religion as "of God." This direct statement of the divine origin of all religions coupled with the syntactic parallels of His appeals to the peoples of the Torah, Evangel and Qur'an previously mentioned, would serve to a pedagogic purpose, e.g. teaching the Unity of the Eternal Religion of God.

In our analysis of so far we have taken note of various features of Baha'u'llah's discourse. 1) The use of New Testament references. 2) Non-specific proclamation of the return of Christ. 3) Chastisements for various spiritual and moral failings. 4) Gradual introduction of Bahá'í concepts and terminology.

Illustrative Passages in Tablet to the Christians

Time does not permit a thorough examination of this Tablet. Below Baha'u'llah's rhetorical methods, as previously identified, are listed with representative quotations from Lawh-i-Aqdas to illustrate each.

Allusion to or citation of Christian scripture

"O concourse of monks! If ye choose to follow Me, I will make you heirs of My Kingdom." (Matthew 25:34)

"Say: In the East the light of His Revelation hath broken; in the West have appeared the signs of His dominion." (Matthew 24:27)

Conflation of Christian and Bahá'í concepts / terminology

“Mount Sinai is astir with the joy of beholding Our countenance. She hath lifted her enthralling voice in glorification of her Lord...” (Compare Psalms 114:4, 6)

“The river Jordan is joined to the Most Great Ocean, and the Son, in the holy vale, crieth out: ‘Here am I, here am I O Lord, my God!’, whilst Sinai circleth round the House, and the Burning Bush calleth aloud: ‘He Who is the Desired One is come in His transcendent majesty.’ Say, Lo! The Father is come, and that which ye were promised in the Kingdom is fulfilled! This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: ‘Ye cannot bear it now.’ “

“Say, did ye not hearken to the Voice of the Crier, calling aloud in the *wilderness of the Bayán*, bearing unto you the glad-tidings of the coming of your Lord, the All-Merciful? “

‘O Bethlehem! This Light hath risen in the orient, and traveled towards the occident, until it reached thee in the evening of its life.

Proclamation of Return of Christ

“Day and night ye have been calling upon your Lord, the Omnipotent, but when He came from the heaven of eternity in His great glory, ye turned aside from Him and remained sunk in heedlessness.“

Baha'u'llah as a Christ Figure

“We, verily, have come for your sakes, and have borne the misfortunes of the world for your salvation. Flee ye the One Who hath sacrificed His life that ye may be quickened? “

“The body of the Loved One yearneth for the cross, and His head is eager for the spear, in the path of the All-Merciful. “

“I never passed a tree but Mine heart addressed it saying: ‘O would that thou wert cut down in My name, and My body crucified upon thee.’ “

“Open the doors of your hearts. He Who is the Spirit verily standeth before them. “
(Revelation 3:20)

Fulfillment of “coming down from heaven”

“He, verily, hath again come down from heaven, even as He came down from it the first time.”

Proclamation of Appearance of Comforter

“Verily, He Who is the Spirit of Truth is come to guide you unto all truth. He speaketh not as prompted by His own self, but as bidden by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.”

“Say, this is the One Who hath glorified the Son and hath exalted His Cause.”

Jesus as Spirit of God

“Consider those who rejected the Spirit when He came unto them with manifest dominion. How numerous the Pharisees who had secluded themselves in synagogues in His name, lamenting over their separation from Him, and yet when the portals of reunion were flung open and the divine Luminary shone resplendent from the Dayspring of Beauty, they disbelieved in God, the Exalted, the Mighty.”

Veil of Names

“Say, O followers of the Son! Have ye shut out yourselves from Me by reason of My Name? “

Failure of the Jewish Religious Leaders (Pharisees)

“How numerous the Pharisees who had secluded themselves in synagogues in His name... yet when the divine Luminary shone resplendent from the Dayspring of Beauty, they disbelieved in God, the Exalted, the Mighty. “

Warning and Chastisement for Failure to Recognize the Lord

“Will ye bar the doors of your houses in My face? This indeed is naught but a grievous error... Beware lest ye dispute that which He proclaimeth, even as the people before you disputed His utterances. “

Introduction of Bahá’í Teachings

“Well is it with the slumberer who is stirred by the Breeze of God and ariseth from amongst the dead, directing his steps towards the Way of the Lord.”

“Let not the things they (Baha’u’llah’s opposers) have perpetrated grieve thee. Truly they are even as dead, and not living. Leave them unto the dead, then turn thy face towards Him Who is the Life-Giver of the world.”

“O concourse of bishops! Ye are the stars of the heaven of My knowledge. My mercy desireth not that ye should fall upon the earth. “

Beatitudes of Baha’u’llah

The Tablet to the Christians concludes with a series of 22 beatitudes, reminiscent of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. There are many subtle similarities between the words of Jesus and the words of Baha’u’llah. Not only do we have a series of expressions beginning with “Blessed is he who...” but there are numerous parallels in form and content. Both lists start with short, concise expressions and progress to lengthier one. Both draw upon the writings of former prophets. Both make use of analogies between physical needs, such as hunger and thirst, and spiritual needs. Both prepare the listener for persecution. Both offer a heavenly reward for faithfulness to God despite obstacles.

To illustrate, here is a selection of Baha’u’llah’s beatitudes.

(2) Say: Blessed the slumberer who is awakened by My Breeze.

(3) Blessed the lifeless one who is quickened through My reviving breaths.

(4) Blessed the eye that is solaced by gazing at My beauty.

(7) Blessed the sore athirst who hasteneth to the soft-flowing waters of My loving-kindness.

(8) Blessed the insatiate soul who casteth away his selfish desires for love of Me and taketh his place at the banquet table which I have sent down from the heaven of divine bounty for My chosen ones.

(11) Blessed the soul that hath been raised to life through My quickening breath and hath gained admittance into My heavenly Kingdom.

(13) Blessed the ear that hath heard and the tongue that hath borne witness and the eye that hath seen and recognized the Lord Himself, in His great glory and majesty, invested with grandeur and dominion.

(18) Blessed is he who hath laid down his life in My path and hath borne manifold hardships for the sake of My Name.

(19) Blessed the man who, assured of My Word, hath arisen from among the dead to celebrate My praise.

(21) Blessed is he who hath remained faithful to My Covenant, and whom the things of the world have not kept back from attaining My Court of holiness.

Tablet to the Christians and the Covenant

Lawh-i-Aqdas or the Most Holy Tablet is another name for the Tablet to the Christians. The significance of calling this Tablet “Most Holy” is nowhere explained, but I would suggest that the Baha’u’llah intended it to be the primary statement of His Covenant to Christians. The use of the term, “Aqdas” naturally brings to mind the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the book of Laws which forms the foundation of the Covenant.

In terms of form and content, Lawh-i-Aqdas makes use of similar rhetorical strategies to those we have seen in Baha’u’llah’s other writings to Christians. Here, however, there are a greater number of references to Christian prophecies and lengthier development of the arguments.

In Lawh-i-Aqdas, Baha’u’llah sets forth His claims in the clearest possible terms to be the returned Christ. He explains how the prophecies of return found in the Gospels and the Revelation have been fulfilled. He sets out the rewards of recognition and the consequences of rejection. The tablet concludes with a passage that recreates the Beatitudes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

In *A study of Baha’u’llah’s Tablet to the Christians*, Michael Sours draws the connection between the Mosaic Revelation on Mount Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount and Baha’u’llah’s Beatitudes. “A second reason for making a parallel with Jesus’ sermon may have been to suggest the establishment of a new covenant, which is an important part of Baha’u’llah’s Revelation. It has often been observed that the Sermon on the Mount itself parallels in significance the Law, or the teachings of God, coming down from Mount Sinai.” (p 154)

Another, and perhaps clearer parallel can be found in the supplemental covenant established by Moses and Joshua. “These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel, in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb (Sinai.)” (Deuteronomy 29:1)

In Deuteronomy 27:4 - 29:1, Moses instructs to the Israelites to confirm the covenant after their entry into the Promised Land. The nation was to be divided into two groups by their tribes. Half were to stand on Mount Ebal and recite the requirements of the Law and the curses that would result from failing to live by it. The other half were to stand across the valley on Mount Gerazim and recite the blessings for obedience. This dramatic enactment established the covenant as a perpetual obligation for all future generations.

When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses instructions were carried out. The twelve tribes were arrayed by Joshua on the Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim, the priests offered a blessing and the prescribed curses and blessings of the Law were read. (Joshua 8:30-35).

Thus, listings of blessings (and curses) are part and parcel of the covenant of God. Jesus apparently picked up on that motif in the Beatitudes. Baha'u'llah followed suit in Tablet to the Christians.

Conclusion

To summarize Baha'u'llah's method of teaching Christians, we can note a definite pattern that reappears over and over again. Often in veiled language, Baha'u'llah sets out His claim as the returned Christ. Likewise references to Christian scripture are frequent. Sometimes direct quotation is used, but more often he indirectly refers to the Bible by picking up Biblical motif and terminology.

Chastisement for failure to recognize Him, is harsher and more specific when addressed to the kings and divines, but is also present when speaking to a more general audience. It must be remembered that copies of the Tablets to the Kings were circulated among the general population. They are a type of open letter. While the primary audience was a given king, Baha'is and those investigating the Bahá'í Faith would also read these tablets. In fact Abdu'l-Baha reports that the second Tablet to Napoleon did circulate among the believers.ⁱ Thus it is likely that Baha'u'llah intended to use the Tablets to the Kings as a vehicle to speak to larger Christian audiences. Thus it is not surprising that we find the similar teaching methodology and arguments in Lawh-i-Aqdas which was addressed to Christians at-large.

One of the most outstanding features, which is found in all of Baha'u'llah's writings, not just those addressed to Christians, is the use of exuberant language which engenders a mystic ecstasy. This effect is achieved by its spirit-centeredness, by its warmth, by colorful imagery, drawing upon well-known and well-loved symbols which are amplified when piled one upon the other. Note the power and passion of the conclusion of Lawh-i-Aqdas.

“Blessed is the man who hath detached himself from all else but Me, hath soared in the atmosphere of My love, hath gained admittance into My Kingdom, gazed upon My realms of glory, quaffed the living waters of My bounty, hath drunk his fill from the heavenly river of My loving providence, acquainted himself with My Cause, apprehended that which I concealed within the treasury of My Words, and hath shone forth from the horizon of divine knowledge engaged in My praise and glorification. Verily, he is of Me. Upon him rest My mercy, My loving-kindness, My bounty and My glory.”

ⁱ “This epistle was sent to Napoleon by post, through the care of Cesar Ketaphakou, as was known to all the companions of His exile. The text of this warning reached the whole of Persia, for it was at that time that the Kitáb-i-Haykal was spread in Persia, and this epistle was among the contents of this book.” (Some Answered Questions, p. 33)