Clouds and the Hiding God: Observations on Some Terms in the Early Writing of Bahá'u'lláh

Moshe Sharon

Introduction and Synopsis

Two early Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, probably the earliest, *Rashḥ-i-ʿAmá* and *Lawḥ Kull aṭ-Ṭa'ám*, one in Persian the other in Arabic, were translated into English and studied by Stephen Lambden and extensively researched by Vahid Ra'fati (in Persian) a decade ago, but they are still the topic of further investigation. In several places in his writings, ʿAbdu'l-Bahá relates to, comments on, and interprets certain themes in these early writings.

The importance of these tablets, as well as the third one, the *Qaṣídatu ʿizz warqá'iyyah*, is that they outline the future development of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the Divine and the divine manifestations, and their relation to the two levels of reality: that which is attainable by the temporal senses and that which is attainable by the prophets' super-awareness (*SAQ* 151).

Highly mystical, the language which Bahá'u'lláh uses in these tablets is cryptic in many places and allusions are constantly made to diverse sources which, on the whole, may be identified. Naturally, coming from the Muslim world, Bahá'u'lláh's prime source of reference is Islam: the Qur'án, its interpretations and the *ḥadíth*. References are also made to *ṣúfí* ideas and language. All these aspects have been studied in depth by Ra'fati in his 1999 article in Persian in *Safíniy-i-ʿÍrfán* (Book 2, pp. 50ff),[1] and although he dealt with only one Tablet,

Rashḥ-i-ʻAmá, his observations are also relevant to other early works of Bahá'u'lláh.

Let us not forget, however, that Islam was not born in a void. It was born in that part of the world that was the cradle of human civilizations, and the residues of all these civilizations were there when Muḥammad and his successors created the Islamic religion and its literature. This ancient legacy was memorized and constantly developed by storytellers, poets, and scholars, generation after generation, and found its way into the Qur'án and its traditions as it had found its way into the writings of the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Christians. It is therefore interesting to examine some of the terms Bahá'u'lláh uses in these early Tablets and compare them to the rich sources that represent the ancient homiletic material which found its way indirectly into Islamic *ḥadíth* literature and eventually also into the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. I refer here to the extensive body of *midrashic* and mystical Jewish literature. I do not mean that the creators of the *ḥadíth* borrowed from the *midrash*, but that both the *midrash* and the *ḥadíth*, in the larger meaning of the word, tapped the same early sources which were available in the territory where they were born and developed.

In this lecture I shall examine several ideas used by Bahá'u'lláh, such as the idea of the cloud as the hiding place of the Divine Being or His dwelling place before creation and after creation. I shall move through the Bible and the *midrash* and show that Bahá'u'lláh's world of thought and imagination is well-rooted in the same ancient ground that gave rise to various types of thinkers before him: Prophets and priests, poets and storytellers, philosophers and theologians.

Many years ago I flew in a small airplane in which there was room only for me and the pilot. It was a winter day and the sky was rather cloudy. At a certain point, when we approached what looked like a wall of cloud the pilot said: "I am looking for an empty hole in the clouds."

I asked: "Why can't you fly through the cloud?" and he said, "I don't know what is waiting inside it".

I remembered this incident when I repeatedly encountered the idea of clouds in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, especially his early writings *Rashḥ-i-'amá'* and the *Tablet of all Food*,[2] and in his later tablet *Ode of the Dove*, as well as in many of his other writings, notably *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, and the *Hidden Words*. In all these writings, Bahá'u'lláh uses the word cloud in an allegorical meaning, sometimes as representing the Divine Being, sometimes the manifestation, sometimes for a new exegesis of the Scriptures, and sometimes, as in *The Hidden Words*, to denote the idea of a veil concealing the person from the truth of the New Manifestation (Thus: *"yá ibn al-'amá'—O son of the cloud!"*).

But since every allegory has its source in more tangible and natural words and although behind the façade of words there is often a hidden meaning, I shall try in what follows to move between the two, mainly concentrating on the sources behind the usage of the idea of the cloud and touching upon two types of clouds bearing a close relation to each other: the hiding cloud and the rain cloud. The first type represents a wider concept than the other.

The Hiding Cloud

In the Tablets of *Rashḥ-i-'amá'*, *Kull aṭ-Ṭa'ám*, *Qaṣídah Warqá'iyyah*, *Ishráqát* and many others, the Arabic-Persian word used for cloud is *'amá'*. In *Kull aṭ-Ṭa'ám* (Khavárí, 2007, 257)[3] this cloud acts as veil behind which, in some cases, the divine dove or *"the dove of light"*, presumably the manifestation, hides singing the eternity of God. The concealing cloud is called in this case, "veils of cloud, *ḥujubát al-'amá'*." The context for identifying the cloud with a veil was the personal situation of Bahá'u'lláh following his imprisonment in the Black Dungeon, his experience of revelation therein, and his expulsion to

Iraq with all his family during the winter of 1853. He describes his experience in that period as "a dark night" creating an unusual superlative adjective in Arabic from the word *layl*—night—to express it: *al-layl al-alyal* for which in English translation would sound like "the nightiest night." As usual in his style he repeats the same idea in other and more familiar forms: *aẓ-ẓulumát al-aṭwal* (instead of *aẓ-ẓulumát aṭ-ṭúlá*) "the longest darknesses (*sic*!)".

His message is clear: there is hope in this dark, seemingly hopeless situation since behind the veil of the cloud, no doubt a dark cloud, Bahá'u'lláh can hear the voice of the divine dove, and we, the readers, whether believers or not, are made to carry the idea of this dove that appears very frequently in Bahá'u'lláh's world of similes. It could well be compared to the dove in Jewish and Christian sources, the dove of the *shekhinah*, literally meaning the divine presence.

At any rate, in this study we are interested in the cloud itself, even before entering into the problems of interpreting it. The cloud represents the dark veil which, in the "dark night", is a perfect hiding place for the divine, whose voice can be heard pointing to His presence, but whose reality cannot be conceptualized. The most striking example of this concept of God's voice without His appearance is found many times in the Bible.[4] In the Book of Exodus, passages describe the descent of God onto the burning Mount Sinai engulfed in clouds and smoke that obscured the top of the mountain. This terrifying event followed something the Israelites coming out of Egypt had already experienced: God leading them in a pillar of cloud in daytime. This cloud turned into a pillar of fire by night. On Mount Sinai, God's appearance was accompanied by the rumbling of thunder and by lightening, and was, no doubt, very spectacular making such a frightening impression on the people that they said to Moses "Speak thou unto us and we will hear; but let not God speak with us lest we die." (Ex. 20:16)

In scores of places in the Bible the idea of God hiding in the cloud is expressed in various forms, but in all of them it is a thick cloud obscuring everything, not only inside it but naturally also what is beyond it. Sometimes this thickness is expressed by the Hebrew word *'av* (pl. *'avím*) instead of *'anán*, or even the two words together as in Exodus 19:9: "And the Lord said unto Moses, 'lo I come unto thee in a thick cloud *('av he'anán)*, that the people may hear when I speak unto thee'…" Note! "Hear" not "see".

Before going on, we must emphasize here that even in the most metaphorical usages when natural objects are involved, like clouds in this case, the allegory is based on visualizing the real thing. No matter how far the metaphor goes in using the natural object to express an abstract idea, it is the natural object which leaves its impression on the mind before entering into metaphysical and speculative interpretations. For this reason, even though the cloud is used by thinkers in an allegorical sense, it is still the cloud of nature which they see and the reader, or listener sees. It is like saying of a person that he is a lion, a snake or a monkey. The meaning is understood but we still see these animals.

For the believer, who is neither a philosopher nor theologian, the natural phenomena are the true reality, and he does not need any interpretation to connect them directly with God.

For the Biblical man, God's presence in heaven as well as his descent to earth were natural realities. He did not indulge in hair-splitting arguments concerning the question of whether God could be described in limiting terms. On the contrary, prophets and ordinary believers alike did not refrain from describing God in the most anthropomorphic language. He has a head, eyes and hands. He is angry, loving, and jealous just like any human. It is his omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, his eternality and concealment which make Him different from and above his creation. At the same time he is

a personal god, who can be approached, who hears prayers and supplications; he is compassionate and merciful, but also demanding and dangerous. He can be loving but also full of rage and quick to punish: a father in a patriarchal family. He is also mysterious, and his mystery is dangerous: "Man cannot see me and live." Moses, who for the Jews is the human being who was allowed to come nearest to God, was not allowed to witness His reality, God's "face" in the language of the Bible; he was allowed to witness only God's "back" (Ex. 33:18–20). This was the highest status that any human (in Judaism, prophets are not manifestations of God) could ever reach, a status which earned Moses in Islam the title of *klím alláh* "he who spoke with Alláh."

Two divine elements are emphasized here: First, the arrival of God in a cloud. In other words, the cloud is not only an obscuring substance, forming an impenetrable veil, but also a divine chariot, to which we shall soon return. Second, the voice of God is heard from inside the cloud. The difference between this voice and the voice of the dove is that with the former, the voice heard from the cloud in Sinai was directed at all the people of Israel, in case of the dove of heaven only the prophet could hear it. However, both voices were heard in the same place, both on Mount Sinai, even if the Mount Sinai of Bahá'u'lláh is a concept more than it is a geographical spot. The difference between the two voices is both in the content and in the principle. The God of Israel established a covenant with His people in the roaring voice of thunder and the fire of lightening. But in Bahá'u'lláh's vision the atmosphere is subdued, quiet and gentle:

> *I beseech thee, my God, in the darkest night when the pigeon of the cause (or: the divine Command) sings on Mount Sinai on the right side of the Red Tree, the melodies of thy eternity; and in those times of long darkness at the presence of the warbling dove of light that sings thy infinity behind the veils of the cloud.*

...يا الهي لأقسمنك في ذلك اليل الأليل عند تغني حمامة الأمر في جبل السيناء عن يمين شجرة الحمراء بتغنيات أزليتك وفي تلك الظلمات الأطول تلقاء تغرد ورقاء النوراء خلف حُجُبات العماء بتغرّدات سرمديتك (رحيق مختوم، ٧٠٠٢ ص ٧٥٢)

In Moses' experience in Sinai it is specifically indicated that

> the glory of the Lord abode upon on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it six days, and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud, and the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went onto the midst of the cloud, and got up into the mount; and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24:16–18)

Bahá'u'lláh also wants "to go into the mount." The scene as described by him is much quieter: no rumbling thunder, but the prophet hears the voice and also wants to be in the presence of his Lord; he also wants to be invited. He uses a very strong word to entreat the Almighty. Turning directly to him he says:

> *I beseech thee…that thou raise me up into the heaven of concealment (ghayb)… and make me ascend to the horizon of witnessing (shuhúd)… and make me climb into the hiding place of thine Oneness, and honour me to encounter thy countenance, so that I take an abode nigh unto thee, [at thy side], and rest upon thine carpet and recline on the pillows of light and stretch out on the heaven of the manifestation…*

Here I wish again to point out the elements of the allegory, their usage and the part they play in the mind of the hearer. Carpets, pillows, cushions, stretching out, reclining, and so on, are of course meant here metaphorically but one can not ignore the fact that first and foremost they are real objects that represent real experience in a real

world. They are carried into the metaphor but it is because of their real nature and function that the metaphor is understood. However, in the eyes of the believer these and other similar objects need not be understood metaphorically. On the contrary, the Muslim believer, for instance, is assured by the Qur'án and a large number of traditions, as well as by endless sermons and writings of learned 'ulamá' that the delights of heaven are as real as they are described, with real food, real drink and real women, and the fires of Hell consume like any fire. Following this observation it should be emphasized that the fire, and clouds, and thunders and lightening on Mount Sinai were real. There is no metaphor here: "Moses drew near the heavy cloud where God was" (Ex. 20:18). The Biblical message is clear: the cloud, or the thick darkness, was a genuine cloud and God was actually in it.

Bahá'u'lláh wants to be there beyond the cloud and he is as bold as Moses, or even bolder for, as we have just seen, he goes into great detail about where exactly he wants to be in the presence of his Lord. Moses expressed the same idea in a short sentence: "I beseech thee: show me thy Glory." (Ex. 33:18) To which God answers: "Thou canst not see my face; for there shall no man see me, and live." (EX. 33:20) Unfortunately, there is no record of God's answer to the same request of Bahá'u'lláh who asks to be honoured with seeing God's "face" or countenance (*bi'an tusharrifaní biziyárati ṭal'atika*).

The cloud as a hiding place of God is a recurring topic in the Bible; moreover it is his abode. Thus, for instance, when King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem and placed the Ark in it "the cloud filled the House of the Lord… for the glory of the Lord filled the House of the Lord." (1K, 8:10–11). In other words, God came in His cloud into the house built for him on earth. For usually He does not dwell on earth, or, in the words of Solomon: "The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick darkness." (1 K, 8:12) The Hebrew word for "thick darkness"—*'arafel*—is rightly translated as "dark cloud" in the King James Bible.

But the cloud, as we have already mentioned, is not God's static home. As a natural phenomenon, the clouds *move*, and therefore the cloud is the chariot of God. In many places in the Bible, God is portrayed as riding, or sitting on a cloud. He is also called "the rider on the clouds." (*rokhev ba'aravot*. Ps. 68:5) The word *'aravot* for clouds was borrowed together with its context from Ugarit where we find the god Ba'al, the chief deity of the Phoenicians, riding on clouds.

God is also described as moving from place to place riding on a cherub. Thus we find in Psalms 18:11(=2 Samuel 22:11): "And he rode upon a cherub and did fly; and he was seen upon the wings of the wind."

The prophet Ezekiel (1:4–26), describes in great detail his vision of the living chariot of the theophanic God, resting on four cherubs. The throne upon which he sits is above them, under the dome of the sky, exactly as in nature the clouds are under the sky, so that God moves with his chariot under the canopy of his permanent abode. He sits on the cherub or cherubs and they spread their wings to conceal him, exactly like the cloud. In fact, clouds and cherubs are one and the same; they interchange easily in biblical descriptions. The idea of the cloud-cherub being God's veil, protecting the divine appearance and at the same time serving as the divine chariot is well represented in a verse from the book of Samuel following the one just quoted which described God as riding on a cherub. "And He made darkness pavilions round about him, dark water, and thick clouds of the sky." (2 Samuel, 22:12)[5]

The cloud as the hiding place of God is no doubt the source of the *ḥadíth* which appears even in traditionally accepted, authoritative collections. When the prophet Muḥammad was asked "where was God before he created his creation", he answered: "He was in a cloud above which was water and beneath which was water . Then he created his throne on the water." (Ibn Májah 65)[6]

This tradition is usually quoted because of the word *ʻamá'* used in it, which has caused some discussion among theologians and mystic philosophers, because it defines God in the most limiting terms. However, believers, as I emphasized before, are not bothered by such hairsplitting arguments, and the concealment of God in a cloud is perfectly fitting, a very enduring human belief. It is enough to read the first verses of the book of Genesis to encounter the same idea.

Before creation or in the very first act of creation "when the earth was without form and void; and darkness upon the face of the water; and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the water" God began his creation in the course of which he divided between the lower water "which was under the firmament" and upper water "above the firmament" (Genesis, 1:7). In the *ḥadíth*, which was created a few thousands years after the Biblical tradition, it is not very difficult to see how this division of water came into being. It is not far-fetched to suppose that the firmament in Genesis could well be the cloud in the *ḥadíth*.

Going deeper into Sumerian-Babylonian records brings us to the story about the god Marduch, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, splitting in two the body of the monster Tiamet, ancient goddess of the primeval waters, creating heaven (with its water) from one half and earth (with its water) from the other half.

Coming back to the *ḥadíth* we are told that God first created His throne on the water, no doubt on the higher water, which is above the cloud, and which thus continues to fulfill its main function as a concealing veil for the divine. In the Biblical tradition this point is made very clear: God erects his throne above the cloud-chariot. Prophet Ezekiel described the throne above the chariot, other Biblical texts describe the throne in heaven, namely inside the canopy above the clouds: "The Lord has established His throne in the Heaven; and his Kingdom ruleth over all," says the Psalmist (Ps. 103:19). And the Prophet Isaiah, criticizing the idea of building the House of the Lord on earth,

declares: "Thus saith the Lord: The heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; where is the house that ye may build unto Me? And where is the place that may be my resting place? (Isaiah, 66:1)

From the chariot (Heb. *merkavah*), God can rise to his throne in heaven, and from the throne he descends to his clouds-chariot. Both ways the gates of heaven open in coordination with his movements; but whichever way, he is always concealed from the creation by the clouds.

Clouds of Rain

What are the clouds to which Bahá'u'lláh alludes in his writings. To begin with, we see that he uses the word *'amá'* as well as the word *ghimám* to describe clouds. (*Ode of the Dove* v. 2, 3) He also uses the word *saḥáb* in the same meaning. Even more interesting is the fact that that he refers to God as he who rides over a cloud, exactly as we have just found in the Biblical references, and one can hardly exclude a Biblical influence particularly since as it seems, reading the Kitáb-i-Íqán, that Bahá'u'lláh (as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá—(*SAQ*, 36ff) was familiar with the Book of Daniel where we read the verse which speaks about the clouds of heaven as a divine chariot: "And behold there came with the clouds of Heaven, One like unto the son of man." (Daniel: 7:13)

In the Ishráqát, we find a reference to Him who rides on the clouds:

qad atá al-wahháb rákiban 'alá as-saḥáb—"the Bestower has come riding on the clouds," and again the same formula in a form of an oath: *qul: balá wa-rabb-as-saḥáb—"Say: Yes, by the lord of the clouds."* (Ishráqát, *Majmú'ah-i-Alwáḥ*, Hofhein, 2000, p. 66 l.11 and last line)[7] The Islamic tradition which speaks about God being in a cloud before creation has been rightly connected with the famous *ḥadíth qudsí* where

God referred to Himself as "hidden treasure (*kanz maknún*)," and that wishing to be known he decided to create His creation. In other words, this *ḥadíth* coming straight from the mouth of God himself attributes to God wills and wishes, even uncontrolled needs such as human needs: to be known. But this *ḥadíth* is neither strange nor original. Going some thousand years back to the Midrashic tradition we find that God created the world because he wanted to build for himself an abode "down below" (*Midrash Tanḥúmah* on *Naso, ch.16*) and to choose for Himself people who would proclaim his Name all the time. How otherwise would He be known? [8]

Bahá'u'lláh rejected the idea that through creation God revealed himself and came out, so to speak, from his hidden abode. Turning to God in an adoring prayer he says that every part in him bears testimony to God's oneness, omnipotence, omniscience, government and glory; *"and that you are Alláh, no god but thee. You are forever a hidden treasure concealed from the eyes and conceptualization, and forever you are what you are eternally and for ever and ever."* (*Ishráqát* 65). In other words God is still concealed probably in his cloud.

If we accept that *Rashḥ-i-ʻamá'* is the first tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, or at least one of the first, then we must consider his particular description of this cloud, because it may reveal some of his later attitude to the same subject. This is a cloud which rains! Presumably water; although the hidden meaning in this poem which may be described as an Ode to the Manifestation is completely spiritual. This poem is a precursor of his much longer poem on the same subject the *Ode of the Dove*. In both of these poems, we encounter the theme or the symbol of the raining cloud. In the early poem, the word used for raining or sprinkling, is *rashḥ* a word which is reserved mainly for water. In the *Ode of the Dove*, written at least thirty years later, the substance sprinkled by the cloud is perfume, ("Because of its resplendence the perfume of the cloud was stirred"—*libahjatihá misk al-ʻamá' tahajjat*) an understandable choice of word for describing the new

Manifestation. But, then he goes on to use another word denoting clouds for describing the New Times of the divine salvation. It is not *'amá'* but *ghimám*. The reference, as Bahá'u'lláh himself explains, is to two verses in the Qur'án, both referring, with and without additional interpolations, to the End of Days, or as Bahá'u'lláh puts it: *kull dhálika min 'alámát al-qiyámah wa-má yaḥduthu bihá:*—All these are the signs of the resurrection (or, End of Days) and that which will happen therein." (Bahá'u'lláh's notes to the first three verses of the Ode of the Dove.)

The idea behind the usage of *'amá'* and *ghimám* in these verses is that these two words are synonyms. The word *ghimám* means heavy clouds, which reflects the meaning of the verb *ghamma*, to veil. So this type of cloud is thick enough to veil God and the angels who, according to the Qur'án, ride over it.

The word *'amá'* represents all kinds of clouds, of any possible shape. However, its usual meaning is a heavy cloud of rain (like its synonyms *saḥáb* and *ghimám*); even if in the dictionaries other meanings can be found, which Vahid Ra'fati diligently collected. These meanings stretch from a very thin cloud to one heavy with rain and a cloud which has already poured its water but has not yet scattered. (Ra'fati, 1999:53)

Dark clouds, heavy with rain, are those connected with God. Man has always been fascinated with rain clouds because, after all, these are the clouds that enable him to live. In all religions, God or the gods cause these clouds to bestow life on earth. The clouds accompanied by lightening and thunder were identified with the great life-giving god. Ancient man paid attention to the fact that clouds of rain are found around the peaks of high mountains even when they are not anywhere else. It is not surprising that the tops of these high mountains, reaching out to the sky and surrounded by clouds pouring their rain, were seen as the abodes of the gods and the situation of the throne of the

supreme deity, the god who was identified with rain and thunder. The ancient Greeks identified Zeus as this god and in times of drought the Athenians prayed: "Rain, rain, O, dear Zeus on the corn lands of the Atheneans and the plains." (Frazer, 1967 210)[9] Zeus's counterpart, the chief deity among the Hindus is Indra the god of war, storms, thunder and rain. In the Daily Jewish prayer, known as the Eighteen Benedictions, the second benediction extolling God's omnipotence and his ability to quicken the dead (including, no doubt, the dry land after the long summer) says:

> Thou O Lord are mighty for ever, Thou revivest the dead, Thou are mighty to save. Thou causest the wind to blow and the rain to fall. (Hertz, *Daily Prayer*, 1976, 133)[10]

The Psalmist, extolling God, speaks frequently about His great power by which He causes rainfall, lightning and thunder.

> "He causeth vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth, He maketh lightening for the rain; He bringeth forth the wind out of his treasuries." (Ps. 135:4)

That rain was the gift of the all-powerful God who was recognized as such by ancient man, no matter to which culture or religion he belonged. Dark clouds of rain were a gift or a reward from God for those who followed his commandments. This divine gift, the rain, is, therefore, conditional.

Thus we read in Deuteronomy 11 in the passage that forms the central part of the *Shema'*, the most important of the Jewish prayers:

> And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season,

> the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy grain, and thy wine and thine oil… (Deu. 11:13–14)

Otherwise, in the case of disobedience:

> …the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, that there be no rain and that the land yield not her fruit… (Verses 14–17)

There was only a short distance between natural rain, representing God's benevolence, and the mystical idea of divine grace streaming down from His secret abode onto the world. There was nothing strange or unusual in the idea which we find in the Jewish Kabbala of the divine life giving water, or God's seed, streaming through the tree of the *sefirot* from the "Ancient of Days", from the highest *sefira*, the Divine Crown, down to the lowest one, the *sefira* of Kingship (*malkhut*). Similarly, it was only natural, therefore, for Bahá'u'lláh to use the same idea to describe the appearance of the new manifestation of God in a term so well-known to people as rain from a cloud. He leaves no doubt about the comparison of this manifestation to real rain, for the language he uses is very clear. He uses the Arabic word *rashḥ* which has the specific meaning, as we saw, of dripping or leaking, mainly of water, but he defines it with the Persian verb *ríkhtan* [*ríz*] which means to pour. This is the verb which he chose as the rhyming word throughout the whole poem. Having established the comparison he can continue by qualifying the pouring down as not being of water but of the secret of God's fulfilled promise, and the rain, therefore, is another rain, not water, and the wind that blows with it brings the perfumes of China. This rain is:

> *The overflow of the manifestation, the pouring of purity, the song of the birds it is, which comes through straight from the inner nothingness.*

This explains why `Abdu'l Bahá, in his interpretation of the word *'amá'* to a believer in Egypt, avoided speaking about the dark cloud of rain and opted for what he defined as the very light, delicate cloud which can sometimes be seen and sometimes not. It is only if you were to concentrate intensely you might see something but when just looking nothing can be seen. Because of this, *'amá'* was understood to mean the absolute reality." (Ra'fati 1999, 58).[11] Just as the cloud can be seen and not be seen so also in the case of the perfect oneness and absolute reality there is perception and non-perception of the attributes which are in the Self (*dhát*), conceptualized and not conceptualized. This is the situation of the "hidden treasures mentioned in the *hadith*." (*ibid*)

Were `Abdu'l-Bahá to regard the cloud as a heavy rain-cloud he would have found himself in the realm of the rather crude idea of God hiding in real darkness which would mean limiting him to a specific place, whereas *'amá'*, as he explains it, turns the whole concept into an allegorical one. Cloud, wind, perfume, rain and sun can therefore be used freely without fear of crossing the border of *ta'yín*, limitation by definition.

NOTES

1 Vahid Ra'fati, *Safíneye 'Irfán*, II, 1999, p58.

2 These two Tablets were studied in great detail by Vahid Ra'fati and Stephen Lambden who also translated them both into English. Ra'fati composed a profound study of the first with extensive interpretations.

3 Ishráq Khavárí, *Raḥíq-i-Makhtúm*, II, 2007, p. 257.

4 As well as in the canonical *ḥadíths* describing the first revelation to Muḥammad through the ear not through the eye.

5 On chariot and cloud (*merkava ve 'anán*) see in detail the study of N.H. Tur-Sinai, *The Language and the Book* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1956: 62–72)

6 Ibn Májah, *Sunan, Muqaddimah*, 13:182 Publ. Dár al-Fikr n.d. p.65

7 Ishráqát, *Majmú'ah-i-Alwáḥ*, Hofhein: 2000, p. 66 l.11 and last line.

8 Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot*, 6a.

9 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1967:210

10 Hertz, *Daily Prayer*, London: Soncino Press, 1976 p133.

11 Vahid Ra'fati, *Safíneye 'Irfán*, II, 1999, p58.