

Commentary on a Passage in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

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O Shaykh! Seek thou the shore of the Most Great Ocean, and enter, then, the Crimson Ark which God hath ordained in the Qayyum-i-Asma for the people of Bahá'. Verily, it passeth over land and sea. He that entereth therein is saved, and he that turneth aside perisheth. Shouldst thou enter therein and attain unto it, set thy face towards the Kaaba of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, and say: "O my God! I beseech Thee by Thy most glorious light, and all Thy lights are verily glorious." Thereupon, will the doors of the Kingdom be flung wide before thy face, and thou wilt behold what eyes have never beheld, and hear what ears have never heard.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *ESW*, pp. 139-140

The above is a passage from Bahá'u'lláh's last major work, the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. This book is addressed to "the son of the Wolf," Shaykh Muhammad Taqi known as Áqá Najafi (1846-1914). It is worth pausing a while to reflect upon the life of this individual as it becomes relevant when we come to consider the above quotation. Aqa Najafi was a member of what became the most powerful clerical family in Isfahan. They were called the Masjid-Sháhí or Najafí family, often also called the Áqáyán-i Masjid-i Sháh. His father, Shaykh Muhammad Baqir (1235/1819-1883), was called "the Wolf" by Bahá'u'lláh on account of his responsibility for the execution of the King of Martyrs and Beloved of Martyrs in Isfahan in 1879. This father and son controlled the Shah Mosque (Masjid-i Sháh) in Isfahan and the Shaykh Lutfu'llah Mosque as well as building a

new mosque, the Masjid-i Naw, and were implacable enemies of the Bahá'í community. Both father and son used their power in Isfahan to extort large amounts of money from the citizens as religious taxes. One of their most lucrative actions was to hoard grain during the famines that occurred and then sell it to a starving population at grossly inflated prices. When the mayor of Isfahan, Haji Muhammad Ja'far, protested at this, they accused him of being a 'Babi' and had him executed.

Father and son rose to the height of their power after the death of two other powerful clerics in Isfahan in 1874-5: In February 1874, Sayyid Asadu'lláh Rashtí died; by this time, the Imám-Jum'ih Mir Muhammad Sultán ul-'Ulamá was very feeble and weak and would be dead within a year. This left Shaykh Muhammad Baqir and his son Áqá Najafí as the preeminent power among the 'ulama of Isfahan for the rest of the century. In May of the same year, 1874, Sultan Mas'ud Mirza Zill us-Sultan (1850-1918) became governor of Isfahan which he was to remain for the next 33 years (until 1907). Although he was the eldest son of Nasiru'd-Din Shah, he was excluded from the succession because his mother was not of the royal family. For most of his time as governor of Isfahan, especially in the later years, Zill us-Sultan was engaged in a titanic struggle for control of the town with Shaykh Muhammad Baqir and Aqa Najafi. At stake was the ability to gain wealth and power through control of endowments, through dominating the merchants, traders and craftsmen of the city, and thus determining whether these citizens gave of their money for government taxes or for religious ones. Whoever was able to exert power in the city would be the person to whom the merchants, traders and craftsmen of the city would turn to settle disputes and in return would be the recipient of emoluments and gifts. In the struggle for control of the city, the Bahá'ís were often caught in the middle. The clerics would raise a disturbance against the Bahá'ís as a way of discomfiting Zill us-Sultan, demonstrating their power and the weakness of the governor. The governor and the 'ulama were not however always on opposite sides. Sometimes, if a wealthy Bahá'í came to their attention, their avarice would surmount their enmity and they would sink their differences in order to gain whatever they could from denouncing him as a Bahá'í.

According to Bahá'í accounts, this is what happened in the first major episode of Bahá'í persecution that occurred in Isfahan. Perhaps fittingly this episode occurred right at the start of the new era for Isfahan, within a few days of the arrival of Zill us-Sultan in 1874. There were episodes of persecution instigated by the Wolf (until his death in 1882) and the son of the Wolf throughout the whole of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, starting in 1874 with an attempt to have all of the Bahá'ís in Isfahan arrested and in particular a family of wealthy merchants, five brothers, who were sons of Haji Abu'l-Hasan Shushtari. Mulla Kázim of Tálkhunchih was executed in February 1879; the King of Martyrs and the Beloved of Martyrs in March 1879; Mirza Ashraf was executed in 1888; then from 1889-1900 for a period of eleven years there was almost continual persecution of the Bahá'ís of the village of Sidih and the small nearby town of Najafabad. In 1903 there was a major upheaval in Isfahan itself during which the Bahá'ís took refuge in the Russian Consulate — this episode inspired the major episode of persecution in Yazd that year that resulted in the death of about 100 Bahá'ís.

In the above-quoted passage there are references to two external works:

1. The first of these external references is to the *Qayyumu'l-Asma*, the first work of the Báb after His declaration. Indeed the first chapter of this book was revealed to Mulla Husayn Bushru'i on the night of the Báb's Declaration to him in May 1844. Bahá'u'lláh makes several references in other places to the fact that there is a reference to a Crimson Ark prepared for the "people of Bahá'" in the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá*. See, for example, the following instance from the *Ishráqát*:

We have admonished Our loved ones to fear God, a fear which is the fountainhead of all goodly deeds and virtues. It is the commander of the hosts of justice in the city of Bahá'. Happy the man that hath entered the shadow of its luminous standard, and laid fast hold thereon. He, verily, is of the Companions of the Crimson Ark, which hath been mentioned in the *Qayyúm-i-Asmá*. [TB 120]

Shoghi Effendi also alludes to the fact that the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá "eulogizes the high station ordained for the people of Bahá', the 'Companions of the crimson-colored ruby Ark'" [GPB 23].

Insofar as can be ascertained, it seems that by the "Crimson Ark," Bahá'u'lláh intended the Cause of God and by the "companions of the Crimson Ark," He intended those who were His true followers, those who manifested the Divine Attributes and were loyal to the Covenant of God. This is seen in such quotations as the following:

Know thou that the souls of the people of Bahá, who have entered and been established within the Crimson Ark, shall associate and commune intimately one with another, and shall be so closely associated in their lives, their aspirations, their aims and strivings as to be even as one soul. They are indeed the ones who are well-informed, who are keen-sighted, and who are endued with understanding. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. [GWB 169]

Bless, O my God, those of the followers of the Bayan as have been numbered with the people of Bahá, who have entered within the Crimson Ark in Thy Name, the Most Exalted, the Most High. Thy might, verily, is equal to all things. [PM 44]

Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself. Verily, such a man is reckoned, by virtue of the Will of God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, with the people of Bahá who dwell in the Crimson Ark.¹

The glory which proceedeth from God, the Lord of the Throne on High and of the earth below, rest upon you, O people of Bahá, O ye the companions of the Crimson Ark, and upon such as have inclined their ears to your sweet voices and have observed that whereunto they are bidden in this mighty and wondrous Tablet.²

How great the blessedness that awaiteth the king who will arise to aid My Cause in My Kingdom, who will

detach himself from all else but Me! Such a king is numbered with the companions of the Crimson Ark – the Ark which God hath prepared for the people of Bahá.³

Once again We exhort all believers to observe justice and fairness and to show forth love and contentment. They are indeed the people of Bahá, the companions of the Crimson Ark. Upon them be the peace of God, the Lord of all Names, the Creator of the heavens.⁴

Adib Taherzadeh states that the reference to the ‘people of Bahá’ as the ‘companions of the Crimson-Coloured Ark’ moving upon the ‘Crimson Sea’ is in the first chapter of the *Qayyumu’l-Asmá*,⁵ but this appears to be incorrect, since the present writer can find no such reference. The closest that the present author can find to such a reference in the *Qayyumu’l-Asma* occurs in the first half of the *Surat al-Akbar* – *Surah 57*. This passage can be translated thus:

Verily God has created around this Báb seas of water of the Elixir, made crimson by the oil of Existence and made alive by the fruit of Desired One. And God has ordained for it ships (arks) of His precious crimson rubies. And only the people of Bahá’ have the permission of God the Exalted One to sail upon it.⁶

2. The second external reference is less obvious. It relates to the words that Bahá’u’lláh bids the Shaykh to recite: “*O my God! I beseech Thee by Thy most glorious light, and all Thy lights are verily glorious.*”

These words come from a dawn prayer for Ramadan, the month of the Islamic Fast, which was revealed by the fifth Shi’i Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir. This prayer is well-known to Bahá’is because the names of the months of the Badí’ calendar, which was created by the Báb and adopted by Bahá’u’lláh, are drawn from that prayer. Indeed they occur in that prayer in the exact order in which they are in the Badí’ calendar. Imam Muhammad al-Baqir urged his followers to recite this prayer because:

If people knew the greatness of this supplication before God, the speed with which it would [enable the devotee to] be answered, they would certainly kill each other with swords in order to obtain it. And if I took an oath that the Ism Alláh al-A`zam (Mightiest Name of God) is in this prayer, I would be stating the truth. Thus, when you recite this supplication, recite it with all concentration and humility and keep it hidden from other than his people [i.e. non-Shi'is].⁷

The first Bahá'í month is Bahá and this prayer by Muhammad al-Baqir begins with exactly the sentence that Bahá'u'lláh bids the Shaykh to recite: "*O my God! I beseech Thee by Thy most glorious light, and all Thy lights are verily glorious.*" A more literal translation of this passage is:

I beseech Thee by Thy Bahá' (Splendour) at its most splendid (abhá') for all Thy Splendour (*bahá'*) is truly resplendent (*bahiyy*). I, verily, O my God! beseech Thee by the fullness of Thy Splendour (*bahá'*).⁸

There is, however, an interesting back-story that may explain why Bahá'u'lláh is bidding Aqa Najafi to recite this prayer. The Bahá'ís in Isfahan had begun to use this prayer in their teaching of the Bahá'í Faith in Isfahan, saying that this prayer proves that Bahá' is the Greatest Name of God: since Muhammad al-Baqir has assured Muslims that the Greatest Name is somewhere in the prayer and it is right that the Greatest Name be given precedence and priority and placed first in the sequence of Names. Therefore the Greatest Name of God is Bahá'.

Word of this reached the ear of the Son of the Wolf Aqa Najafi. The rest of the story is taken up by the French scholar A.-L.-M. Nicolas, who was a French diplomatic officer in Iran at this time and visited Isfahan. Nicolas relates the following story which demonstrates well the degree of Aqa Najafi's hatred of the Bahá'ís – that he was even willing to distort the religion of Islam rather than see any advantage to Bahá'ís. Concerning the Muslim dawn prayer for the Fast, Nicolas writes:

The Imam Baqir [the Fifth Imam of the Shi'his] has said that this prayer is the loftiest of prayers because it contains the greatest name of God – Bahá'! The Muslim world naturally remained in agreement with this until the day when someone drew the attention of Aqa Najafi, the mujtahid of Isfahan, to the fact that in it was precisely the name of the Man-Yuzhiruhu'llah [Him Whom God shall make manifest] promised by the Bab. Aqa Najafi prohibited the saying of this prayer from that time on.⁹

Word of Aqa Najafi's action in prohibiting the recital of this dawn prayer of the Imam Muhammad Baqir must have been sent to Bahá'u'lláh as He was in receipt of regular reports from all of the towns and villages where Bahá'ís lived. Thus when in the passage that we are considering, Bahá'u'lláh bids Aqa Najafi to recite this very same dawn prayer that the Shaykh had prohibited, we can pause to wonder about this. Was Bahá'u'lláh teasing Aqa Najafi in asking him to do what he had prohibited? Was Bahá'u'lláh rebuking Aqa Najafi for prohibiting a prayer that revealed by one of the holiest figures in Shi'i Islam? How would Aqa Najafi have read this passage?

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NOTES

¹ Kalimát-i-Firdawsiiyih, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 71

² Lawh-i-Dunyá, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 97

³ Kitab-i-Aqdas, para 84; see also Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 212

⁴ Ishraqat, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 134

⁵ Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, v 1, p. 280

⁶ Translated from Manuscript of E.G. Browne collection, F11(11), dated 1 Muharram 1323 (1905), in hand of Mirzá Áqá Khán Kirmání, in University Library, Cambridge, p. 191.

⁷ Trans. by Stephen Lambden, see <http://hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/dawnP.htm>.

⁸ Trans. by Stephen Lambden, see <http://hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/dawnP.htm>.

⁹ Nicolas, *Livre de Sept Preuves*, pp. 57-8n; translated in Moojan Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844-1944*, pp. 280n.