

ELUCIDATIONS

“Point” and “Letter” in the Writings of the Báb

by Muhammad Afnan

The use of the terms “Point” and “Letter” in the Writings of the Báb traces its origin to a hadíth attributed to Imám ‘Alí, in which he says, “All that is in the Torah, the Evangel and the Psalms is in the Qur’án; and all that is in the Qur’án is in the opening súrih; and all that is in the opening súrih is in [the phrase] Bismi’lláh [Bismi’llahir-Rahmanir-Rahim]; and all that is in Bismi’lláh is in [the letter] Bá; and all that is in Bá’ is in its point” (provisional translation).

The Báb uses this hadíth, which is often quoted in the Sacred Writings of the Faith, to elucidate two novel themes. The first is that the Point of Truth is the source of all existence in both the spiritual and the material world. In other words, in the material or physical world, all lines and letters begin from a single dot or point. All shapes and patterns in existence are formed through variations of lines, which in turn begin with the point. Similarly, human speech, which is what distinguishes humankind from other creatures, is based on words and letters, which also have their origin in a single point. So, too, in the spiritual world, the source of all existence is compared to a Point and all the spiritual truths that are latent within the human reality emanate from that single and unconstrained Point.

The second theme explained by the Báb is the spiritual meaning and significance of letters. Letters—and of course, words—which are derived from and subordinate to the point, can be said to have moved from the station of abstraction peculiar to the point to the station of contingency and variation that belongs to creation. Each has its own form and characteristics, distinct from others. Since each letter is in itself independent and possesses distinctive features, which, in combination with other letters, form words with special and distinct meanings, it can be said that each letter has its own spirit and character. Letters are thus similar in a sense to human beings, who have individual souls and possess distinctive powers of understanding.

Perhaps on this basis, human individuals are called “Letters” in the Bayán. For instance, believers and deniers are distinguished from one another as “Sublime Letters” and “Other than Sublime Letters.”¹ The Bayán seems to indicate that this distinction will continue until the appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest, but there is no mention of what will take place after that. Probably for this reason the Báb revealed nineteen Tablets addressed to Himself and the eighteen Letters of the Living and adorned them with the addition of another Tablet addressed to Him Whom God shall make manifest. It seems that in this way, the Báb has envisioned the return of the Letters of the Living at the time of the revelation of Him Whom God shall make manifest and indicated Himself and these Letters as the first to believe in the Promised One of the Bayán when He appears.

Facsimiles of these Tablets are published at the beginning of *The Dawn-Breakers* at the direction of Shoghi Effendi. However, it must be noted that the nineteenth Tablet, designated “Majmáu’l-Hayákil” (Union of Temples (?)) is addressed to the Báb Himself, and not to the nineteenth Letter of the Living, since there are only eighteen Letters of the Living. However, it is correct to consider it to be addressed to the nineteenth Letter of the first Váhid (in the abjad system, “váhid” is equivalent to the number 19). This is a point that should be mentioned in future editions of *The Dawn-Breakers*.

Based on the hadíth quoted in the beginning, all spiritual truths are contained within the phrase “Bismi’lláh-Rahmánir-Rahím” and within the letter “Bá” and within the point of the letter. In Arabic, there are nineteen letters in the aforementioned phrase and the word “Váhid” is also equivalent to the

number 19 in the abjad system. Considering the importance of the number 19 in the Qur'án,² the Báb has created an order that may be compared to a pyramid, at whose pinnacle is the Point of the Bayán, below him the eighteen Letters of the Living, and below each Letter another eighteen Letters, and so on ad infinitum.³ The extension of this pattern to the second power, i.e., 19 times 19 which equals 361, is specified in the Bayán and designated as “Kull-i-Shay” (All Things), which is the numerical equivalent of 361. However, the Báb explains that Kull-i-Shay' is in fact infinite, and that it includes an infinite number of váhids.⁴

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that although the Báb's system—because it deals with letters and words—may be confused with the beliefs of the “Hurúfí” and Nuqtaví” sects, this is by no means the case. These sects attributed magical qualities and powers to the letters of the alphabet and associated letters to supernatural worlds, which they believed influenced the human world. It is evident from all the Writings of the Báb, however, that his description of points and letters bears no allusion to such occult sciences. The principles of the system created by the Báb are simply reflections of an order inherent and manifest in all degrees and conditions of the world of existence, and they suggest that the foundations and governing laws of creation are one, whether in the abstract world of points, lines and letters, or in the highest stations of the realms of the spirit.

Notes

- 1) Persian Bayán, II. 4.
- 2) Islamic scholars have discovered, using computers, that the composition of the Qur'án is based on the number 19 and consider this as one of the miracles of the Qur'án. The fact that there are nineteen letters in the phrase “Bismi'lláhir-Rahmánir-Rahím” also confirms the authenticity of the above-mentioned hadith.
- 3) Persian Bayán, VII. 8.
- 4) Persian Bayán, khutbih

