From Adam to Bahá’u’lláh: The Idea of a Chain of Prophecy*
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Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestations of Adam with that of the Báb... —Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings XXXI

The purpose of this paper is to briefly present a preliminary contextualization of the Bahá’í idea of a chain of prophecy, which is an intimate and important feature of the Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation.2 Although the term “prophecy” commonly is understood as forth-telling, in academia it is better known as prophecyology,3 i.e., it has to do with “prophetoLOGY” rather than with “futuroLOGY” (although prophecy, admittedly, sometimes includes this dimension as well). The technical term “chain of prophecy” can be found in various religious contexts other than in the Bahá’í Faith, and is not specifically a Bahá’í term. Generally speaking, a chain of prophecy refers to a sequence (linear and/or cyclical) of mediators (prophets, messengers, avatars, etc.). It can be defined as “a sequence of religious mediators who operate between divine (supramundane) and earthly (mundane) realms.”

This paper argues that variations, or family-resemblances,4 of such an idea of a chain of prophecy can be located in the following religious contexts, including some major and well-known religions of the world (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), as well as a few less well-known religions (Bábism, Manichaeism, and Jainism), and branches, or sects, of religions (Shaykhism, Pseudo-Clementines, Elkesaites, and Ebionism).

The Bahá’í Faith

The opening passage from the Kitáb-i-ºqán above may serve as an example where Bahá’u’lláh explicitly states the idea of an unending succession of revelation, ranging from Adam to the Báb.5 Two main themes that are relevant for this paper are therefore the closely related ideas of:

- the chain of successive revelations
- the linkage of Adam and the Báb (and ultimately Bahá’u’lláh)

It is also significant that it is within this immediate context of the quoted passage of Bahá’u’lláh where Shoghi Effendi first employs the technical term progressive revelation.6 A similar statement “from Adam” is also found elsewhere in the Kitáb-i-ºqán where Bahá’u’lláh refers to “all the Prophets, from Adam even unto the °Seal, °[Muhammad].”7 The idea of a chain of prophecy can also be found in statements by “Abdu’l-Bahá, e.g., “From time immemorial the divine teachings have been successively revealed, and the bounties of the Holy Spirit have ever been emanating.”8 More specifically, “Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of “From the days of Adam” while implying the idea of a chain of prophecy:

From the days of Adam until today, the religions of God have been made manifest, one following the other, and each one of them fulfilled its due function, revived mankind, and provided education and enlightenment.9

In another passage “Abdu’l-Bahá explicitly identifies various religious figures while expressing the idea of a chain of prophecy:

For the position of Adam, with regard to the appearance and manifestation of the divine perfections, was in the embryonic condition; the position of Christ was the condition of maturity and the age of reason; and the rising of the Greatest Luminary [Bahá’u’lláh] was the condition of the perfection of the essence and of
the qualities. This is why in the supreme Paradise the tree of life is the expression for the center of absolutely pure sanctity—that is to say, of the divine supreme Manifestation. From the days of Adam until the days of Christ, They spoke little of eternal life and the heavenly universal perfections. This tree of life was the position of the reality of Christ; through His manifestation it was planted and adorned with everlasting fruits.10

In the last passage it is clear that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses various organic metaphors (embryo, tree, fruits) to convey the accumulative growth of religion/revelation. He writes more elaborately on the idea of a chain of prophecy in the following passage:

All these holy, divine Manifestations are one. They have served one God, promulgated the same truth, founded the same institutions and reflected the same light, Their appearances have been successive and correlated; each One had announced and extolled the One Who was to follow, and laid the foundation of reality . . . the divine religions They established have one foundation; Their teachings, proofs and evidences are one; in name and form They differ, but in reality They agree and are the same.11

In connection with describing the Bahá’í Faith, Shoghi Effendi states that “The Faith of Bahá’u’lláh should indeed be regarded . . . as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations.”12 Shoghi Effendi is even more specific than both Bahá’u’l-Láh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá since he uses the chain metaphor in conjunction with a description of the Bahá’í Faith and progressive revelation in at least two occasions:

It [the Bahá’í Faith] should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man’s collective life on this planet.13

[The Bahá’í Faith] readily and gratefully recognizes their [previous Dispensations] respective contributions to the gradual unfolding of one Divine Revelation, unhesitatingly acknowledges itself to be but one link in the chain of continually progressive Revelations . . .14[emphases added]

More explicitly, Shoghi Effendi clearly connects the idea of a chain of prophecy with the doctrine of progressive revelation:

It [the Bahá’í Revelation] regards them [the religions that have preceded it] . . . as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part . . . the fundamental principle which constitutes the Bedrock of Bahá’í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final.15

With regard to Adam, Shoghi Effendi states that “There are no Prophets, so far, in the same category as Bahá’u’lláh, as He culminates a great cycle begun by Adam.” [emphasis added]16 In the following passage it is possible to see how Shoghi Effendi refers to progressive revelation and the chain of prophecy while simultaneously employing an organic metaphor:

. . . the series of progressive Revelations starting with Adam and concluded by the Revelation of the Seal of the Prophets, marked by the successive appearance of the branches, leaves, buds, blossoms . . .17

In addition, Shoghi Effendi also refers to Islam as “the succeeding link in the chain of Divine Revelation.”18

The terms “Prophet” and “Messenger”19 are frequently utilized by especially Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but the term “Manifestation of God”20 appears to be the most commonly used epithet. The Manifestation of God21 is also, according to Cole, at the center of the teachings of Bahá’í.22 Similarly, Saeidi states that:

The doctrine of manifestation, the concept of manifestation, is a fundamental, central, theological, philosophical, and sociological concept of the Bahá’í Faith. . . . Everything should be understood, can be understood in terms of this fundamental category, in terms of this fundamental concept. [It is] not just one concept among other concepts, but the central conceptual category of the Bahá’í Faith.23

Although it may be correct to infer that the concept of the Manifestation of God plays a very central role in Bahá’í, it is argued that this concept is integral of a much larger and more central doctrine—that of progres-
sive revelation.\textsuperscript{24}

The terminology, which is connected with the Manifestations of God, is rather exhaustive. The following citation by Bahá’u’lláh may illustrate the abundant and complex variety of titles and metaphors that are associated with this concept:

It hath, therefore, become manifest and evident that within the tabernacles of these Prophets and chosen Ones of God the light of His infinite names and exalted attributes hath been reflected, even though the light of some of these attributes may or may not be outwardly revealed from these luminous Temples to the eyes of men. That a certain attribute of God hath not been outwardly manifested by these Essences of Detachment doth in no wise imply that they who are the Day Springs of God’s attributes and the Treasuries of His holy names did not actually possess it. Therefore, these illuminated Souls, these beautiful Countenances have, each and every one of them, been endowed with all the attributes of God.

In addition to the above stated designations, Bahá’u’lláh entitles the Manifestation of God as: “Tabernacles of holiness,” “Primal Mirrors,” “Essences of Being,” “Day Stars of His divine guidance,” “symbols of His divine unity,” “sanctified Beings,” “Manifestations of His wondrous Essence,” “the Luminaries of truth,” “Manifestations of the Sun of Truth,” “Manifestations of Holiness,” “Birds of the celestial Throne” etc. Further, the concept of “manifestation” occurs also in connection with other epithets. In the next passage Bahá’u’lláh enumerates various titles of the Manifestations of God and states that they are all essentially identical:

By virtue of this station they have claimed for themselves the Voice of Divinity and the like, whilst by virtue of their station of Messengership, they have declared themselves the Messengers of God. In every instance they have voiced an utterance that would conform to the requirements of the occasion, and have ascribed all these declarations to Themselves, declarations ranging from the realm of Divine Revelation to the realm of creation, and from the domain of Divinity even unto the domain of earthly existence. Thus it is that whatsoever be their utterance, whether it pertain to the realm of Divinity, Lordship, Prophethood, Messengership, Guardianship, Apostleship, or Servitude, all is true, beyond the shadow of a doubt.\textsuperscript{26}

Although Bahá’u’lláh above seems to include a variety of titles under the epithet of Manifestation of God, in His Kitáb-i-“qán He elevates the “Prophet endowed with constancy” who has revealed a “Book” and which suggests the advent of a new revelation and the establishment of a new religion.\textsuperscript{27} ’Abdu’l-Bahá is more explicit on this point since He clearly distinguishes between two kinds of prophets:

Universally, the prophets are of two kinds. One are the independent Prophets Who are followed; the other kind are not independent and are themselves followers. The independent Prophets are the lawmakers and the founders of a new cycle . . . The Manifestations of universal Prophethood Who appeared independently are, for example, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. But the others who are followers and promoters are like Solomon, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. For the independent Prophets are founders; They establish a new religion and make new creatures of men; They change the general morals, promote new customs and rules, renew the cycle and the Law. Their appearance is like the season of spring, which arrays all earthly beings in a new garment, and give them a new life. With regard to the second sort of Prophets who are followers, these also promote the Law of God, make known the Religion of God, and proclaim His word. Of themselves they have no power and might, except what they receive from the independent Prophets.\textsuperscript{28}

Here one can see an important difference in that the independent Prophets,\textsuperscript{29} i.e., Abraham to Bahá’u’lláh, are “founders” of “a new religion.”\textsuperscript{30} These kinds of Prophets are also referred to as “universal Prophets.”\textsuperscript{31} The “second sort of Prophets” is dependent\textsuperscript{32} upon the former for whom they are “followers and promoters.”\textsuperscript{33} In other words, the latter kind of prophets (Salomon to Ezekiel),\textsuperscript{34} does not establish a new religion since they do not reveal a “Book.” They do, however, “promote the Law of God” and “make known the Religion of God.” Consequently, only Prophets “endowed with constancy,” or the “universal” and “independent Prophets,” are upheld as Manifestations of God.

In the example above ’Abdu’l-Bahá enumerates six universal Prophets, or Manifestations of God, but other sources mention additional religious figures, and therefore the following names can be added to the sequence:
Adam, Noah, Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Húd, Sálih, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.35

If one were to include both kind of prophets (independent and dependent) that Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi mention in their writings, one could enumerate thirty-two religious figures (in alphabetical order):


Yet, neither Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, nor Shoghi Effendi specify a limited number of Manifestations of God. On the contrary, the number of Manifestations of God appears to be unknown or unlimited. On this theme Bahá’u’lláh states:

[T]he Manifestations of His Divine Glory . . . have been sent down from time immemorial, and been commissioned to summon mankind to the one true God. That the names of some of them are forgotten and the records of their lives lost is to be attributed to the disturbances and changes that have overtaken the world.36

[T]he manifold bounties of the Lord of all beings have, at all times, through the Manifestations of His divine Essence, encompassed the earth and all that dwell therein. Not for a moment hath His grace been withheld, nor have the showers of His loving-kindness ceased to rain upon mankind. [emphasis added]37

Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that there have been many holy Manifestations of God. One thousand years ago, two hundred thousand years ago, one million years ago, the bounty of God was flowing, the radiance of God was shining, the dominion of God was existing.38

From these examples it should be clear that the foregoing mentioned number of six Manifestations of God is not an exclusive number, since Bahá’u’lláh states that they “have been sent down from time immemorial,” “in every age,” and even that “the names of some of them are forgotten.” Similarly, the quote by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá above supports this conclusion since He states that the Manifestations of God existed even as far back as “a million years ago.” The appearance of a Manifestation of God, according to this view of prophecy, may be a rare event, but it is not a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind. Although the list of religious figures above seems to be limited to the Near and Far East regions, Bahá’u’lláh also says that “unto the cities of all nations He hath sent His Messengers…”39 Together with the above sentence “encompassed the earth” it is possible to interpret such passages as an allusion to a global scheme of revelation. Consequently, the revelatory process does not seem to be restricted to any specific time period or geographic locality.

Although the examples above are predominantly oriented toward the past it is relevant to turn the attention to the future perspective of the Manifestations of God. Thus, for example, in His Súriy-i-Sábr, Bahá’u’lláh addresses this issue and states that “God hath sent down His Messengers to succeed to Moses and Jesus, and He will continue to do so till ‘the end that hath no end’; so that His grace may, from the heaven of Divine bounty, be continually vouchsafed to mankind.”40 Thus, Bahá’u’lláh only claims to be the latest, not the last, in a sequence of Manifestations of God.

The Middle Eastern and Iranian Contexts

Babism

Bahá’u’lláh was an early and distinguished adherent of the Báb (1819-1850), the Prophet-founder of the Bábí religion,41 though the two never physically met. That the Báb was a promulgator of the idea of continuous revelation is foremost seen in His claim of being the Qá’im/Mahdí of Islam.42 The following passage the Báb conveys clearly the idea of a chain of prophecy, not only in the past but in the future as well:

In the time of the First Manifestation the Primal Will appeared in Adam; in the day of Noah It became known in Noah; in the day of Abraham in Him; and so in the day of Moses; the day of Jesus; the day of Muhammad, the Apostle of God; the day of the ‘Point of Bayán’ [the Báb]; the day of Him Whom God shall make manifest; and the day of the One Who will appear after Him Whom God shall make manifest.
Hence the inner meaning of the words uttered by the Apostle of God, ‘I am all the Prophets,’ inasmuch as what shineth resplendent in each one of Them hath been and will ever remain the one and the same sun.\textsuperscript{43}

Here the Báb explicitly asserts a chain of prophecy. However, this chain does not end with him, but He prophesies a subsequent \textit{man yuzhiru’lláh} (Him Whom God shall make manifest):

For everything shall be set aside except His Writings, which will endure until the following Revelation. And should anyone inscribe with true faith but one letter of that Revelation, his recompense would be greater than for inscribing all the heavenly Writings of the past and all that has been written during previous Dispensations. Likewise continue thou to ascend through one Revelation after another, knowing that thy progress in the Knowledge of God shall never come to an end, even as it can have no beginning. [\textit{emphasis added}]\textsuperscript{44}

Another, and more elaborate passage, can be found in Báb’s Persian Bayán:

It is clear and evident that the object of all preceding Dispensations hath been to pave the way for the advent of Muhammad, the Apostle of God. These, including the Muhammadan Dispensation, have had, in their turn, as their objective the Revelation proclaimed by the Qá’im. The purpose underlying this Revelation, as well as those that preceded it, has, in like manner, been to announce the advent of the Faith of Him Whom God will make manifest. And this Faith—the Faith of Him Whom God will make manifest—in its turn, together with all the Revelations gone before it, have as their object the Manifestation destined to succeed it. And the latter, no less than all the Revelations preceding it, prepare the way for the Revelation which is yet to follow. The process of the rise and setting of the Sun of Truth will thus indefinitely continue—a process that hath had no beginning and will have no end\textsuperscript{45}

The probably clearest example of a chain of prophecy is found in the Báb’s Kitáb-i-Panj Sha’n (Book of the Five Grades)\textsuperscript{46}, where He explicitly writes of nine \textit{man yuzhiru’lláh} (Him Whom God shall make manifest):

His [God’s] exteriority in [the Qur’án] is Muhammad, the Messenger of God; in the Bayán it is [the Báb]; in the Gospel it is Jesus, the Spirit of God; in the Psalms it is David, the upright of God; in the Torah it is Moses, the One Who conversed with God. And after the Bayán it is [1] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [2] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [3] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [4] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [5] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [6] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [7] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [8] man yuzhiru’lláh; and after man yuzhiru’lláh, [9] man yuzhiru’lláh.\textsuperscript{47}

Although the Báb here explicitly mentions nine \textit{man yuzhiru’lláh}, this number should not be taken at face-value but rather as a symbolic figure. Thus, Lambden writes that the Báb “did not simply speak of one future appearance of Manifestations of God but nine or more such theophanies. In fact, He did not limit the number of their successive and progressive Divine Manifestations in the world.”\textsuperscript{48} The following passage of the Báb implies that the number of future Prophets indeed is indefinite:

God hath raised up Prophets and revealed Books as numerous as the creatures of the world, and will continue to do so to everlasting.\textsuperscript{49}

Shaykhisim

The Báb had been a student of Síyyid Kázim Raští (d. 1843) who in turn had been the foremost disciple of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá’í (d. 1825), the founder of Shaykhisim.\textsuperscript{50} The Báb was thus well versed in the Shaykhi school of prophetology. Thus, for example, Rafati writes the following about the Shaykhi view of continuous and successive revelation:

According to the Shaykhi theory, a prophetic cycle began with Adam and continued to the Prophet Muhammad. During this Adamic cycle, six major prophets appeared: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. While most Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last prophet, Shaykh Ahmad maintains that Muhammad was the last prophet only within this cycle. . . . Shaykh Ahmad’s view of Muhammad as the final prophet only within the Adamic cycle implies a continuing divine revelation through a succession of prophets in a series of cycles; while each cycle has a beginning and an end, the cyclical process itself is progressive and continuous.\textsuperscript{51}
Rafati explains that Shaykh Ahmad uses the analogy of the development of an embryo with humanity’s spiritual progress and were various prophets play central roles:

According to the Shaykhi view, the six stages of embryonic development corresponds to the six prophets who appeared in the Adamic cycle: the stage of the life-gem corresponds to Adam; the stage of the clot, to Noah; the stage of the morsel of flesh, to Abraham; the stage of the bones, to Moses; the stage of the flesh, to Jesus, and the stage of another creation, to Muhammad. Following the analogy further, as the first five stages of embryonic development are prerequisite to the entrance of the spirit into the body, the first five religions are perceived as performing a preparatory function for the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. The last stage of the development of an embryo is final only in respect to its life in the womb, for the now completely developed embryo will be born into another world. Likewise, although the sixth stage of the Adamic cycle, i.e., the Prophet Muhammad, is the last stage of its cycle, it is, at the same time, the beginning of a new phase in the spiritual development of humankind and marks the inception of a new cycle.52

Here we can clearly see that although Muhammed is regarded as the “last Prophet” He is this only within a cycle, i.e., the “Adamic cycle.” Thus, in Shaykhism we can enumerate the following six Prophets:

1) Adam, 2) Noah, 3) Abraham, 4), Moses, 5) Jesus, 6) Muhammad

Islam

Shaykhism emerged within the Shi‘a branch of Islam that historically has emphasized the continuity of revelation after Muhammed. Yet, this succession was mainly restricted through the succession of Imams. However, what is of importance in this context is once again the idea of a chain of prophecy. An example is the Isma‘ilis who believe that

Prophets come in cycles which comprise a “great week” of seven thousand years. Each cycle is presided over by one of the Prophets . . . (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad), as well as by an “intermediary” (wâsi'), (Seth, Shem, Ishmael (Ismá‘îl), Aaron, Peter, ‘Alî), and a “permanent Imám” (Imám-Qâ’îm). . . .53

Similarly, the Ahl-i-Haqq “believe in seven successive manifestations of God, coming to dwell ‘in a garment.’”54 It is also possible to locate passages of an esoteric identification with previous prophets. For example, in the hadîth al-Sahâba, ‘Alî55 is supposed to have made the following claim:

I am Adam, I am Noah, I am Abraham, I am Moses, I am Jesus, I am Muhammad; I move through the forms as I wish—whoso has seen me has seen them, and whoso has seen them has seen me.”56

According to Nicholson, Rûmî (1207-1273) believed that “in every era there is a new manifestation of God,” and in his Dîwân, Rûmî states that “every instant the Loved One assumes a new garment, now of age, now of youth.”57 According to this view, the Spirit has appeared in various forms as: Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus. Nicholson further writes that “In every generation he [the Spirit] was coming and going, until at last he appeared in Muhammad and ruled the world and he became ‘Alî with his sword.”58

The Iranian al-Mukanna’ (fl. 755-85) went one step further and identified himself not only with various prophets but with God:

I am your God and the God of the whole world. I call myself by whatever name I wish. I am he who manifested himself in the creation in the guise of Adam, and later in the guise of Noah, later in the guise of Abraham, later in the guise of Moses, later in the guise of Jesus, later in the guise of Muhammed, and later in the guise of Abu Muslim, and finally in the appearance you now behold.59

Although the Shi‘i branch’s interpretation of an idea of a chain of prophecy is not accepted in the Sunni and majority branch of Islam, both the term and the idea of a “chain of prophets”60 can clearly located. Waldman, writing on the topic of Nubûwah (prophethood) in Islam, states for example that it has been God’s primary means of communicating with humankind, involving a long and continuous chain of revelation-bearers who were related both functionally and genetically . . . . The chain stretched from the first human, Adam, to the deliverer of the Qur’ân, Muhammad. . . .61

The idea of a chain of prophecy is further and lucidly depicted in several sûrahs of the Qur’ân.62 For exam-
ple:
Say ye: “We believe in God, and the revelations given to us, and to Abraham, Ismá’īl, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all Prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them . . .” (2:136)

We have sent thee inspiration, as we sent it to Noah and the Messengers after him: We sent inspiration to Abraham, Ismá’īl, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some Apostles We have already told thee the story; of others We have not—and to Moses God spoke direct—apostles who were given good news as well as warning . . . (4:163-65)

The two most common terms for “prophet” in the Qur’ān are rasūl (messenger) and nābi (prophet). According to The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam, the former is a Prophet “who brings a new religion or a major new revelation” and the latter is a prophet “whose mission lies within the framework of an existing religion.” Some of the prophets are also referred to as ālū-l-‘azm (prophets endowed with constancy; Qur’ān 46:35).

The following twenty-six prophets (in alphabetical order) can be found in the Qur’ān:

Yet, the number of prophets does not seem to be exhausted by the ones listed above, since some traditions give the symbolic number of 124,000 prophets, and, more importantly, because the Qur’ān (10:48; 16:36) also states that prophets/messengers have been sent to every nation/community. It is also significant that some authors even use the term “progressive revelation” and “progressive disclosure” in the context of Islamic revelation.

However, although Islam clearly recognizes a chain of prophecy, a progressive disclosure of revelation, and that a prophet has been sent to every nation, one of the basic doctrines of Islam is that Muhammad is khāṭīm al-anbiyā’ (the Seal of Prophets, Qur’ān 33:40), and that Islam is the perfected religion (Qur’ān 5:3-5). This is often interpreted as if there will be no other prophet after Muhammad and, consequently, that there will be no future religion other than Islam. On this point, for example, Zaki writes that “the Qur’ān abrogates all previously revealed scriptures just as Muhammad’s prophethood supersedes the missions of all previous prophets, which are now rendered otiose of his universality” and that Muhammad therefore “retrospectively annuls . . . all the prophets who had preceded Him and at the same time invalidates the claim of any future claimant to the title.” Similarly, Nadwi writes that “It was perfectly logical as well as inevitable, too, that after the complete and final guidance had been vouchsafed to the Prophet of Islam, the chain of prophecy should come to an end with him.”

This idea that Muhammad is completing a chain of revelation can further be seen in the following hadīth recorded by al-Bukhārī (810-870):

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allāh’s Apostle said, “My similitude in comparison with the other prophets before me, is that of a man who has built a house nicely and beautifully, except for a place of one brick in a corner. The people go about it and wonder at its beauty, but say: ‘Would that this brick be put in its place!’ So I am that brick, and I am the last of the Prophets.”

By using this brick/house analogy, Muhammad is depicted as “the last brick” and thereby completing the “house of revelation.” He is thus seen as “the last of the Prophets.” In other words, although it is clearly possible to find a chain of prophecy in Islam, this chain is seen as ending with the Prophet Muhammad.

Manichaeanism

Having briefly reviewed the Bābī-Bahá’í and Islamic views of prophecy, it significant to note that Andrae asserts that “Mohammed’s conception of revelation . . . betrays a relationship to the Ebionitic-Manichaean doctrine which cannot be accidental.” What is especially significant with the religion of Máni (216-276) is that here it is possible to locate a prophet-founder’s first and explicit claim of being a part of a chain of prophecy.
An example of this claim can be found in the writings of al-Birûnî (973-1048), who cites the following from Máni’s *Shâhrâragán*:

Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the apostles of God. So in one age they have been brought by the apostle called Buddha to India, in another by Zarathustra to Iran, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age through me, Máni, the apostle of the God of truth to Babylonia.\(^{72}\)

In this passage it is clear that Máni sees himself as one of the apostles who have been sent “from time to time” and to different countries. Thus, he recognizes the following series of prior prophets:

1) Buddha 2) Zoroaster 3) Jesus

However, al-Šâhristânî\(^{73}\) lists another sequence of prophets:

1) Adam 2) Seth 3) Noah 4) Abraham 5) Buddha 6) Zoroaster 7) Jesus Christ 8) Paul

Other sources also list Shem, Sem, Enosh, and Nikotheos\(^{74}\) as prophets. For example, Lieu writes that:

We learn from the first discourse in the Kephalâïa that Mani regarded Seth (or Sethel), the son of Adam, as the first of a line of special prophets from the Father. He was followed by Enosh, Enoch and Shem. After them came Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and Paul. After Paul, mankind was gradually led astray into sin until the time when there appeared again a just man who belonged to the ‘kingdom’. Together with another righteous person they gave strength to the church. . . After they had descended to the Land of Light, the church again degenerated and became like a tree which was deprived of its fruits. It was then that Mani’s apostleship began, as he was the Paraclete of Truth who was promised by Christ to this last generation.\(^{75}\)

Thus, a more complete list of the successive prophets of Manichaeism would include the following twelve prophets:


What makes Manichaeism especially interesting in the context of the Bahá’í Faith is that Máni “believed he was promulgating a new universal religion that would supersede all others.”\(^{76}\) Máni, however, did not only uphold that his religion was a continuation or succession of previous religions, but that it was superior and final. Consequently, Lieu states that Máni saw himself “as part of a chain of revealers which finally terminated with him.”\(^{77}\) Thus, it is small wonder that Máni, centuries before Muhammad, used the epithet *khâtîmu‘*n-*nabîyîn* (the seal of the prophets).\(^{78}\) Although Manichaeism seem to have influenced Islam, it is also important to note that Máni grew up in an Elkesait environment.

Pseudo-Clementines, Ebionites, and Elkesaites

Another context in which the chain of prophecy occurs is the Judeo-Christian sects that flourished around the first four centuries C.E. The Pseudo-Clementines refers to a collection of early Christian writings\(^{79}\) (325-380) that were clearly influenced by Ebionism. The Ebionites were Christians who maintained the Jewish law and claimed Ebion as its founder, but this term is more likely derived from *ebyonim* (the poor).\(^{80}\) Earlier it was seen that Andrae referred to “the Ebionitic-Manichaean doctrine.” Both the Ebionites (c. 200 C.E.) and the Elkesaites (c. 100 C.E.) identify Adam and Christ as prophets. They also believed in a series of successive incarnations.\(^{81}\) The Pseudo-Clementines and Ebionites also speak of a reincarnated *verus prophet* (true prophet).\(^{82}\) This “True Prophet” is viewed in a recurring fashion as “the seven pillars of the world” and which can be enumerated as:

1) Adam 2) Enoch 3) Noah 4) Abraham 5) Isaac 6) Jacob 7) Moses

The eight and final pillar is that of Christ.\(^{83}\) However, the idea of seven pillars that the world rests upon is, according to Schoeps, derived from the old Jewish *Haggadah*. He further states that:

All the seven are alike in that each is a saddiq (righteous man), i.e., a true prophet. Also, the picture of the wandering Shekinah (the glory of God) was widely known and frequently associated with the seven righteous men. The names change, but the patriarchs and Moses are constant members of the group; in them the glory of God returns to the earth after the sins of the earliest period had driven it away. The later cabala developed these views into a doctrine of the reincarnation of the original man Adam Kadmon.\(^{84}\)
Schoeps refers to this chain of prophecy as “cyclical succession of the Spirit of revelation.” In discussing its range of influence he states that it “extends from Elkesai, the Mandaeans, Mani, and Mohammed, to the Shi'itish Imam-doctrine of the Hadith” and that it subsequently was “translated back into Judaism.” Above it was seen that this idea of a chain of prophecy could be extended forward to Shaykhism, Babiism, and the Bahai Faith. The rest of this paper will show that this idea can be extended even further backwards to encompass not only Christianity and Zoroastrianism, but also Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Christianity

Although Schoeps does not mention Christianity, it is clear that at its center is the belief that Jesus is the eschatological and soteriological Masiah (Christos) of Judaism. Thus, from a Christian perspective, He is promised and prophesied in the Jewish scriptures (TNK)—the “Old Testament”—and the “New Testament” is the testimony and the fulfillment of this promise. For example, in John 5:46 Jesus is supposed to have said: “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for He wrote about Me” which probably is an allusion to Dt. 18:15-19 “Yahweh your God will raise up for you a Prophet like Me from among your own brothers.” Jesus is indeed also referred to as a “prophet” many times in the New Testament and John (7:40) even makes a reference of Jesus as “the prophet.” More importantly, Jesus refers to Himself twice as a “prophet.”

At the time of Jesus it was also thought that some of the ancient prophets Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah would appear as a prophet revivibus before the coming of the Messiah. This is apparent in the dialogue of the “Transfiguração” passages in e.g., Matt. 17:1-13.

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus . . . The disciples asked Him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize Him, but have done to Him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Although this passage suggests a more esoteric view of the chain of prophecy, it may allude to Jesus’ prophetic stature being on par with the theophanies of Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist. A perhaps more explicit example of a chain of prophecy is “The Parable of the Tenants.”

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one [1], killed another [2], and stoned a third [3]. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son [4] to them. “They will respect my son,” he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.” So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Commenting on this passage Aune writes that “The series of messengers represents the prophets who were prosecuted and killed by a rebellious Israel, while the beloved son is Jesus, the last in a long series of prophet-ic messengers who have experienced rejection by the people.” Aune also writes of Jesus as “the final messenger of God.” Another passage, which is often employed by Christian adherents of a continuous and progressive revelation between the OT and the NT is Heb. 1:1:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.

Judaism

Although Schoeps refers to that the idea of a “cyclical succession of the Spirit of revelation” this idea was eventually “translated back into Judaism.” Yet, the idea of a chain of prophecy can clearly be found even in the ancient Hebrew religion (from which Rabbinical Judaism is the only surviving offspring). Thus, for example, the Encyclopedia Judaica boldly asserts:
There is... no analogy to the Israelite chain of prophecy... which produced a successive line of prophets spanning several centuries who guided and taught the people, reproved and censured them for their sins, and threatened impending destruction or promised future restoration.\(^{100}\)

This, however, could be questioned since both Christianity and Islam make claims of being heirs to this “successive line of prophets.” Still, Judaism is different from both Christianity and Islam since it has no single founder or unique soteriological mediator, although Abraham and, especially Moses— “the paragon of prophets”\(^{102}\) and “the master of the prophets”\(^{103}\)—play extraordinary roles. Thus, the Encyclopedia Judaica states that “The classical prophets... considered themselves successive links in the chain of divine messengers extending back to Moses.”\(^{103}\)

Judaism has a variety of terms for “prophet” e.g., návi (prophet), ysh ha-'Elóhím (man of God), ró’eh and hózeh (seer).\(^{104}\) That the prophets have played an important role in Judaism can be seen in the very name of the TaNaK\(^{105}\) where N stands for Nevi’im (Prophets). However, the prophets can be further subdivided into nevi’im rishonim (“former” or “earlier” prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), and nevi’im aḥaronim (“latter” or “major” prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel; and the twelve “minor” prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micha, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).\(^{106}\)


Although both Adam and Noah have been considered as prophets in the above reviewed religions it is noteworthy that neither one is regarded as a prophet in Judaism. Yet, even though fifty-five prophets can be listed, the Talmud also states that the number of prophets was innumerable, or more precisely, twice the number of Jews who left Egypt, estimated as being 600,000. Thus, the number of prophets would amount to 1,200,000.\(^{107}\)

Zoroastrianism

In the above contexts it was seen that Zoroaster was only mentioned in the Bahá’í and Manichean contexts. The time-frame of Zoroaster, or more precisely, Zarathustra (Spitaman), has never been satisfactorily resolved since scholars are divided into two groups: (1) Boyce who estimates 1700–1200 B.C.E. and (2) Zaechner and others who claim 628–551 B.C.E. Moreover, later Pahlavi tradition dates Zarathustra to have lived 6000 B.C.E., but this date is not accepted by Western scholars. Thus, there is a great variance from 6000-600 B.C.E. However, most scholars agree that Zarathustra was an historical figure and some even suggest that He may have been the very first prophet or apocalyptic history,\(^{108}\) or the “oldest known millenarian prophet.”\(^{109}\) From the extant Zoroastrian writings it is clear that He was zaotar or áhravan (priest)\(^{110}\) and that He also saw himself as saoshiyant (saviour),\(^{111}\) and matrān (prophet).\(^{112}\) Nyberg states that Zoroastrianism’s greatest innovation was its prophethood and that “Zarathustra was the first who thought good, spoke good, acted good. He was the first áhravan, the first rathaēs (chariot-fighter), the first vāstryō,fsuyant (shepherd),” and “mankind’s first lawyer and teacher of the heavenly command.”\(^{113}\)

In the context of the idea of a chain of prophecy it is interesting that a scheme of ten incarnations exists in the Avesta.\(^ {114}\) It states that Vērēthraghna (glorious power) appeared as follows:

1) Váta (wind), 2) Golden-horned bull, 3) White horse, 4) Male camel, 5) Boar, 6) Young man, 7) Váregan-bird, 8) Ram (?), 9) Goat, 10) Warrior\(^ {115}\)

What is especially significant in this context is that Nyberg writes that Vērēthraghna “has wandered through time and makes the unifying bond in the history of Iran.”\(^ {116}\) Further, there is the notion of kavis (priest-kings) who are seen as forerunners of Zoroastrianism, and Nyberg states that “even very old Avesta-texts may have had a fixed series of such pre-zoroastrian rulers and heroes.”\(^ {117}\) Moreover, both Nyberg and Widengren describe Zarathustra as “primordial man reincarnated,”\(^ {118}\) which suggests the notion of pre-existence. Indeed, this idea
can be seen in the division of the development of the cosmos and its three protagonists:

1) Gayó-mareta (primordial man),
2) Zarathustra, and
3) Saoshyant.

This idea was also seen above in that Zarathustra was seen as the first priest, chariot-fighter and shepherd. Thus, these examples illustrate the notion of a series of succession, although it is unclear if they have had any soteriological function.

The idea of the Saoshyant (savior) can be found at several places in the oldest Zoroastrian texts—the Gáthás. Gnoli states that “the concept of the future savior is one of the fundamental notions of Zoroastrianism” and that “the doctrine . . . had already taken shape in the Achaemenid period (sixth to fourth centuries B.C.E.).” For example, in Yasht 19:89 the Saoshyant is labeled as a “messenger of Ahura Mazda.” Yet, the identification of Saoshyant as a savior is quite misleading since Zarathustra, as was seen above, also refers to himself as Saoshyant. However, as was also stated earlier, Zoroastrianism recognizes three successive soteriological mediators after Zarathustra, although it is believed that the number of three Saoshyants was a later development. It is possible to enumerate the three future and successive soteriological mediators of Zoroastrianism as:

1) Uschedar (Uchshyatereta), 2) Uschedarmah (Uchshyat-nemah) 3) Saoshyant (Astmtvatereta).

The three Saoshyants are depicted as “sons” of Zarathustra although it is clear that they are born during the last two millennia (i.e., the years 10,000-12,000 in the Zoroastrian calendar). The first millennium is inaugurated with the arrival of Uschedar, who will “renew the prophet’s [Zarathustra’s] revelation and defeat the forces of evil.” Here Boyce implies that it is the original revelation that is renewed. The twelfth millennium is inaugurated with Uschedarmah, and the final Saoshyant (Astmtvatereta) arrives at the end of the final millennium—in the year 11943. Thus, it is important to note that the time-span between the three saviors is approximately 1,000 years, i.e., a millennium. Yet, it is possible to note, as Nyberg states, that “Zarathustra makes a continuous series with his mythical sons, the apocalyptic savours” and that “the appearance of Zarathustra is the prelude to the eschatological event.”

Further, the last Saoshyant is, in the Pahlavi-literature, always identified simply as “Soshyant,” but the Avesta refers to him as Astvatereta (he who embodies righteousness). Nyberg writes that Astvatereta is “the pinnacle and completion of humanity.” As was stated above, Nyberg sees “Zarathustra as primordial man reincarnated” and likewise are “the apocalyptic savours Zarathustra reincarnated.” The evidence for this, according to Nyberg, is Yasna 46:3 where Zarathustra identifies himself with the Saoshyants. Similarly, Widengren sees the three Saoshyants as “incarnations of Zarathustra as the divine Primordial Man” and that it is therefore possible to discern “a clear series of four saviour-figures: Zarathustra, Hushetar, Hushetarmah and Soshyans.” Although Gayó-mareta may not have functioned as a soteriological figure in the mythical past, he may, since he is regarded as the incarnation of Zarathustra, still be included in the series of soteriological mediators. It is therefore possible to summarize and enumerate the following series of five successive soteriological mediators of Zoroastrianism as follows:

1) Gayó-mareta (primordial man), 2) Zarathustra, 3) Uschedar 4) Uschedarmah 5) Saoshyant (Astmtvatereta)

The Indian context

Having briefly reviewed and discussed the idea of a chain of prophecy in the Middle Eastern and Iranian contexts, we will now turn to three religions of Indian context: Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Buddhism

The central figure of Buddhism is Siddharta Guatama (566-486/560-480 B.C.E.) or “the Buddha.” Yet, on this point Parrinder writes that “We commonly speak of Gotama as the Buddha, but every Buddhist, Theraváda, as well as Maháyána, believes that there are numerous Buddhas, past and to come.” Thus, the theme in Buddhism which is most relevant in this context of the idea of a chain of prophecy is the idea of successive Buddhas, or Buddhavamsa (Lineage of Buddhas). This idea seems to be specifically Indian and ultimately influenced by the Hindu avatara-scheme, and most probably, indirectly influenced by Jainism, although Gautama “Quite early . . . is perceived as one of several Buddhas in a series that began in the distant past.” Related to this is the idea from the Jáataka tales which states that the Buddha has gone through five-hundred
previous births and that, in a sense, there are Buddhas in preparation.

The idea that a Buddha is born in various epochs can, for example, be found in the Digha Nikaya:

Know, Vasetha, that (from time to time) a Tathagata is born into the world, a fully Enlightened One, blessed and worthy, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the world, unsurpassed as a guide to erring mortals, a teacher of gods and men, a Blessed Buddha.

Moreover, in a passage from the Saddharmapundarika (Lotus Sūtra), the Buddha supposedly said “I am repeatedly born in the world of the living.” However, Parrinder writes that the idea of succession of Buddhas is already established in the oldest part of the Buddhist Pāli canon, the Sutta Pitaka, mentions six previous Buddhas where Gautama is the seventh, but the future Buddha—Maitreya—is not mentioned here (although He is mentioned elsewhere in the Pāli canon). Thus, in the oldest canon it is possible to identify the following succession of Buddhas:

1) Vipassi, 2) Sikhi, 3) Vessabhu, 4) Kakusandha, 5) Konāgamana, 6) Kassapa, 7) Gautama, 8) Maitreya

The first Buddha, Vipassi, is supposed to have lived eighty thousand years ago. Later texts, e.g., Buddhavamsa, does not mention only six different Buddhas but twenty-five, where Gautama is identified as the twenty-fifth Buddha and where eighteen Buddhas existed before Vipassi. The Buddhas are as follows:


So far it has been shown that the concept of the Buddha is highly ambivalent and that Buddhism recognizes a limited number in the succession of Buddhas. Yet, other Buddhist writings do not limit the Buddhas but enumerate either a greater number or an infinite number of Buddhas in the universe. For example, although the Mahāvastu views Siddhartha Gautama as the last in a succession in the present cycle, it still names thousands of other Buddhas. Other texts e.g., the Lalitavistara and the Saddharmapundarika, mention millions of Buddhas. Again the Mahāvastu treat the “Buddha-lands” and “Buddha-fields” as asankhyeya (innumerable) and that the Buddhas are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Finally, the Lotus Sūtra states that:

At that time Shākyamunibuddha’s emanations in the eastern quarter, Buddhas of the lands equal in number to the sands of a hundred thousand myriad of millions of Ganges rivers, each Buddha preaching Dharma, assembled in this place, Buddhas of ten directions all gathering in order and sitting in the eight quarters.

Although the previous paragraphs convey the multiplicity of Buddhas there are still Buddhist writings which points in the other direction i.e., towards an underlying unity beyond the multiplicity of Buddhas. For example, the Milandapanaha states that:

There is not distinction between any of the Buddhas in physical beauty, moral habit, concentration, wisdom, cognition and insight. . . for all Buddhas are exactly the same as regards Buddha-dhammas.

This text only treats the physical, moral and mental qualities, but the Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha and the Lankāvatāra Sūtra teach the unity of all the Buddhas. Parrinder writes that the unity and identity of all the Buddhas is implied in the concept of the Dharma-kāya (Truth or Cosmic Body), and “therefore the Buddha was actually all the Buddhas of the past.” He labels this idea as a sort of “universal pantheism or rather pan-Buddhism.” Similarly, but writing about the five celestial Buddhas, Lamb also states that:

Buddhism came close to Hindu monism, not to say, monotheism, with the development of the notion of a primordial buddha behind the five celestial buddhas [Vairocana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Amoghāsiddhi].

Moreover, the Lotus Sūtra depicts the vyūha (manifestations, emanations) of the Buddha. Although the two authors write about different areas of Buddhism, they reach the conclusions that there is the concept of a transcendental Buddha who unifies either the Buddhas of the past or the celestial Buddhas. Parrinder summarizes succinctly what has been said above as follows:
The Buddha is not an Incarnation or Avatar of God or any other superior being. He incarnates himself by himself. Yet there is a transcendent element, and the Buddha is a substitute-deity. The Buddha himself, or the reality behind all the Buddhas, or the Dharma-body, is ultimate and omnipotent. He is either utterly transcendent and absolute, like Brahma, or both transcendent and personal like Vishnu. In Mahâyána there are countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, yet as in Theraváda there is a determined move to show that fundamentally they are all one. This is not in the sense that there is only one Buddha at a time, to guarantee his supremacy, but there is a need to get the bewildering multiplicity of Buddhas to their unity in the one Buddha or Dharma.¹⁴⁹

**Jainism**

The religion of Jainism was founded by Vardhamana (599-527 B.C.E.), better known as Mahávira (great hero), or Jina (victor, conqueror). The most important concept in Jainism in the context of an idea of a chain of prophecy is the doctrine of the Tîrthâkaras (one who builds the ford, ford-finders, crossing-makers). They are also referred to as Jinas, or Arhants (saints). Together with the Cakravartins (wheel-turners) and other such heroes, they form the class of the venerated sixty-three personages of the Jain universal history. Together they are called Mahápurushas (great men).¹⁵⁰ Caillat refers to the Tîrthâkaras as “Prophets who periodically teach the world the truth of the imperishable Jain tradition” and that “Mahávira was one of an unending succession of tîrthâkaras.”¹⁵¹ Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Jain tradition is referred to as “imperishable,” which could be seen as synonymous with an “eternal” tradition. However, what is interesting is the notion that the Tîrthâkaras occur periodically and in a succession. Thus, Jainism enumerates twenty-four Tîrthâkaras who “are said to appear at given periods in selected regions.”¹⁵² Padden states that this succession may be the oldest and is perhaps the origin of the development of the twenty-five Buddhas of Buddhism.¹⁵³ The twenty-four Tîrthâkaras can be enumerated as follows:


According to the Jain tradition, the first Tîrthâkara, Rishabh, lived eight million years ago.

**Hinduism**

The idea of a chain of prophecy can in Hinduism best be found in the doctrine of avatars. The concept of avatára is often thought of as equivalent to “incarnation,”¹⁵⁵ but etymologically speaking, the word means rather “descent” or “down-coming.”¹⁵⁶ It is also interesting that the term was historically coined fairly late and that the word prádurbháva (manifestation) is rather more frequent in the older texts.¹⁵⁷ Some authors suggest that the “germ of the doctrine of the Avatar” can be derived from the Purusha-sukta in Rig Veda.¹⁵⁸ Yet, the word avatára neither occurs in the four Vedas, nor in the classical Upanishads, but it is implicitly referred to in the later Upanishads.¹⁵⁹ A classic list over the dashávatára (ten avatars) was later established in an appendix to the great Indian epic Mahábháráta, called Harivamshá (c. 600 C.E.). The names and the numbers of the avatars differ in various works (from ten, twenty-two, and thirty-nine, or innumerable), but according to the twenty-two-avatar-scheme the common avatars of Vishnu are:

1) Fish (matsya), 2) Tortoise (kúrma), 3) Boar (varáha), 4) Man-Lion (Nara-simha), 5) Dwarf (vámaná), 6) Ráma with the axe (Parasu-Ráma) 7) Ráma of the Rámayána, 8) Krishna, 9) the Buddha, 10) Kalkin.

Although this scheme clearly differs from the Zoroastrian scheme on several points, one can still recognize a few similarities: the fact that there are ten “incarnations,” the Boar (varáha), and that both Vishnu and Vépréthraghna appear in both animal and human forms. It is also possible to recognize a few animals that are associated with the Jain Tîrthanakaras, e.g., Bull, Horse, Boar, and Goat. Moreover, the fourteenth Tîrthanakara, Anantanatha, is sometimes associated with the Falcon, and Vépréthraghna also appears as the Vâregan-bird.

The twenty-two-avatar-scheme enumerates the following:

1) Primeval man (Purusha), 2) Boar (varáha), 3) Nárada, 4) Nara and Naráyána, 5) Kapila, 6) Dattátreya, 7) Yajna, 8) Rishabh,¹⁶¹ 9) Prithu, 10) Fish (matsya), 11) Tortoise (kúrma), 12) Dhanvan-tari, 13) Mohini,

As was seen in Zoroastrianism, each Saoshyant was associated with “his own time” (millennium) and the three soteriological mediators after Zarathustra were concentrated to and identified with the last two millennia, but the Indian schemes associates a soteriological mediator with each age or cycle.162

Comparisons and Conclusions

Having reviewed the idea of a chain of prophecy in the Middle Eastern, Iranian and Indian contexts, it should by now be clear that the idea of a chain of prophecy—above defined as “a sequence of religious mediators who operate between divine (supramundane) and earthly (mundane) realms”—is not the exception but rather the rule in some of the world’s great religions. Yet, it has also been shown that in the great Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) no Indian or Iranian figures could be found. Conversely, in the three Indian religions reviewed (Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism) neither Semitic nor Iranian figures could be located. Moreover, in Zoroastrianism no Semitic or Indian figures could be identified, although a few parallels could be noted between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. Even though it appears as we have three independent religious “strands” (Semitic, Iranian, Indian) it is significant that they all have, nevertheless, developed a family-resemblance of an idea of a chain of prophecy.

If one were to compare which prophets that are the most common in the Semitic strand163 with that of the Bahá’í Faith, one would immediately recognize many of the above reviewed religious figures (except Krishna and the Báb). This comparison could be depicted as follows:

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<tr>
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<th>The Semitic Strand and the Bahá’í Faith</th>
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<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
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<td>Jesus</td>
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The only figure that occurs across all the religions in the Semitic strand is Abraham. Jesus appears in all traditions except Judaism. As was mentioned earlier it is noteworthy that neither Adam nor Noah appears in Judaism. Similarly, it is peculiar that Moses does not appear as a prophet in Manichaeism.

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One major difference, however, between these three strands is that the Semitic and Iranian are predominantly *linear* whereas the Indian is *cyclical*. Moreover, it was also seen that of all the religious contexts reviewed, two religions—Manicheism and the Bahá’í Faith—clearly included prophets/Manifestations of God from *all three* strands.

Thus, Mání includes from the
- **Semitic** strand: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Christ, Paul
- **Indian** strand: Buddha
- **Iranian** strand: Zarathustra

Similarly, but more extensively, the Bahá’í Faith includes from the
- **Semitic** strand: Adam, Abraham, Daniel, David, Ezekiel, Hud, Isaac, Isaiah, Ishmael, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jesus Christ, Jethro, Job, Joel, John the Baptist, Joseph, Joshua, Lot, Moses, Muhammad, Noah, Sálih, Solomon, Zachariah
- **Indian** strand: Krishna (Kalkin) and Buddha (Maitreya)
- **Iranian** strand: Zarathustra and the Báb
- **Chinese** strand: Confucius

Although Manicheism and the Bahá’í Faith draw from similar strands, the emphasis is in both cases clearly on the *Semitic* strand. One striking difference, however, is that the Bahá’í Faith does not include Mání in its chain of prophecy. Another difference is that Bahá’í Faith includes a *fourth* strand—the *Chinese*—although Confucius is not regarded as a Manifestation of God in the Bahá’í Faith.

Even though it was stated that we could speak of three independent strands, it is clear that scholars of religion believe that these different traditions have directly or indirectly influenced each other. For example, writing on the influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, Duchesne-Guilmém states that:

> [T]he influence of Zoroastrianism on the evolution which came to light in Judaism from the time of the Exile onwards and through the manifold contacts with Iran which were to follow. The development in Palestine of the doctrines of Apocalypse, Kingdom of God, Last Judgment, Resurrection, Man and Son of Man, Prince of this World, or Prince of Darkness, and Saviour, was to prepare a milieu capable of receiving and interpreting the message of the life, the word, and the death of Jesus.

Similarly, Amanat writes of the “Perso-Mesopotamian melting pot of the formative Islamic age” where “the Mahdí of Muslim eschatology acquired many features of his Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian predecessors.” Amanat thus seems to be in agreement with other scholars of religion who have noticed that the idea of the Mahdí is part of a greater and assimilated religious heritage where the Iranian tradition of Zoroastrianism and the Semitic traditions have mixed and recycled ideas in a syncretistic fashion. Thus, although we may see the Semitic and Iranian traditions as distinct, we could also, as Hodgson calls it, speak of “the Irano-Semitic tradition.”

Yet, the idea of “the Irano-Semitic tradition” does not explain the development of the idea of a chain of prophecy in an Indian context. On this point Lamb writes that:

> All Buddhists accept the phenomenon of Maitreya the future Buddha, who, according to most views, abides in Tusita heaven as a bodhisattva. Early on, Buddhism may have come under the influence of Zoroastrianism. By the beginning of the Christian era the cult of a Buddhist Messiah was widespread.

Thus, Lamb suggests a Zoroastrian influence on Buddhism. Although the Zoroastrian view of cosmos is linear, Widengren calls this the “doctrine of cyclic revelation” and he goes much further than Lamb when he states that this doctrine is so intimately bound up with the original Zoroastrian teaching of the four successive saviours, viz. Zarathustra and the three Saoshyants, that its ancient Iranian origin cannot well be challenged. And last but not least: the doctrine of cyclic revelation, as an Iranian theoloumenon, shows so much resemblance with the Indian avatara speculation that, in all probability, we are able to assume the existence of an ancient Indo-Iranian dogma of revelation as the real background of the doctrine of Mani in this case.
In other words, we may speak not only of “the Irano-Semitic tradition” but of an “Indo-Iranian dogma of revelation.” Buck seems to be in agreement with this when he also refers to the concept of “cyclic revelation”:

The later Elkesaites movement had adopted Jewish-Christian ideas of cyclic revelation which show a strong affinity with the Ebionite-Christian concepts found in the Pseudo-Clementines. It appears from all of this evidence that the doctrine of cyclic revelation itself cyclically recurs, e.g. in the doctrines of Zoroastrianism, Ebionite Christianity, Manichaeism, Islam, and the Báb and Bahá’í Faiths, as well as in Buddhist thought and Hindu apocalypse.176

To oversimplify, a few scholars of religion seem to suggest a pattern of influence in the following manner:177

(Indian Strand) Hinduism < Jainism < Buddhism

(Semitic Strand) Zoroastrianism

In this view the “Indo-Iranian dogma of revelation” lies at the core and eventually influences “the Irano-Semitic tradition.” Such a tradition is clearly expressed by Mání in the Second Century C.E. who is well aware of not only the Semitic and the Iranian strands but the Indian as well. Being a native of Babylon (Mesopotamia/modern Iraq) he was geographically situated between the Semitic and Indian strands. Aware of Zarathustra, the Buddha and the Christ, he claimed to be their fulfillment. Similarly, Bahá’u’lláh, seventeen centuries later, and although a native of Iran, it was in Baghdad, Iraq where he claimed to be the fulfillment of all previous prophets and manifestations of God.

Notes

* This revised and edited paper was originally presented as The Chain of Prophecy: Progressive Revelation as a Theory of Relativity.
1) I certainly hope that scholars of religion who are competent in the various religious traditions mentioned in this paper and in comparative religion one day will study this idea more in depth.
3) Etymologically the word “prophet” comes from the Greek prophēta, meaning “one who declares, an expounder.” Interestingly, the word prophet is etymologically derived from the Indo-Germanic root BHĀ (Skeat 1984:415) which is structurally similar to the three radicals in the Arabic Bahá “beauty, magnificence, splendor; brilliance” (Wehr 1976:80).
5) It is noteworthy that Bahá’u’lláh here combines the words “contemplate” and “inward eye.” I ultimately interpret this to be an esoteric or meditative exercise. Although Bahá’u’lláh does not state, “look with thine outward eyes,” I will show that the idea of a chain of prophecy also can be located in various esoteric religious contexts.
6) “And when this process of Progressive Revelation culminated . . .” Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh 74-75, italics added.
7) Kitáb-i-‘quán 244.
9) Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Bahá 51, italics added.
10) Some Answered Questions 124, italics and clarification added.
12) World Order of Bahá’u’lláh 103, italics added, 163; God Passes By 10.
13) World Order of Bahá’u’lláh 163, italics and clarification added.
14) God Passes By 100, italics and clarification added.
16) From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand, December 26, 1941, italics added.
17) CF 82, italics added.
From Adam to Bahá’u’lláh

18) PDC 120.
19) These terms are sometimes used synonymously. See Kitáb-i-‘qán 51, 152; Gleanings 48; Some Answered Questions 23.
20) A‘. mazhar-i-iláhí. See Kitáb-i-‘qán 33; Gleanings 26, 50, 59; Some Answered Questions 127-128.
21) Gleanings 26, 49-50. For a more detailed study on this concept see Cole 1982.
26) Gleanings 55-56.
27) See Kitáb-i-‘qán 216:220.
28) Some Answered Questions 164-166:149-150.
29) A‘. nabi-istiqlál.
31) Some Answered Questions 164-166.
32) A‘. nabi ghayr mustaqlíl.
33) See e.g., Towfigh 1989:171-74; Schaefer 1995:129
34) However, both David and Joseph are accounted as Prophets, Messengers, or “Messengers of the Word of God” in Kitáb-i-‘qán 51, 255.
36) Kitáb-i-‘qán 174, italics added; Gleanings 20.
37) Kitáb-i-‘qán 14, italics added.
38) Promulgation of Universal Peace 463.
40) Quoted in World Order of Bahá’u’lláh:116, italics added.
41) For more in-depth analyses of the Bábí religion see e.g., Browne 1918; Amanat 1989.
42) For a discussion on the Qá‘ím/Mahdí in Shi’í Islam see e.g., Sachedina 1981; Halm 1991.
43) SB: 126, clarification added.
44) SB:91, italics added. Cf. SB:89.
45) SB:105-106.
46) I want to thank Dr. Stephen Lambden for this information.
48) Lambden (personal communication March, 1997).
49) SB:125.
50) For more in-depth analyses of Shaykhisim see e.g., MacEoin 1979; Rafati 1990.
53) EI “‘Ismá’ílís” 196.
55) In Shi’í Islam it is especially the “extremist sects” (ghuluw) which have not only portrayed Imam ‘Ali as superior to the Prophet Muhammad, but have even asserted his apotheosis. See e.g., Moosa 1988.
60) Bilgeföld 1969: 17.
61) ER “Nubúwah” : 2, italics added.
63) CEI 1989.
64) For a list of the prophets mentioned in the Qur’ān see e.g., 3:36; 4:161; 6:33; 17:57.
73) ERE 398. See also Augustine’s Contra Faustum Manichaeum, xix, 3.
75) Lieu 1985:85.
76) ER 170.
77) Lieu 1985:156, italics added.
78) Asmussen 1975:11-12; ER Manichaeism 166.
79) Erroneously attributed to Clement of Rome, the first of the “Apostolic Fathers” (d. ca. 100 C.E.), and hence the name “Pseudo-Clementines.”
81) EER 144.
82) ABD 261.
83) ERE “Ebionism” 145. See also Andrae 1960:100.
84) Schoeps 1969: 70.
91) italics added.
93) 1 Kings 17-19.
94) Matt. 11:10-14 “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. . . . For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John . . . He is the Elijah who was to come.”
96) Cf. Matt. 3:17 “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”
100) EJ 1160, italics added.
101) EJ 1170.
102) EJ 1175.
103) EJ 1164, italics added.
104) EJ “Prophets and Prophecy” II 154.
105) An acronym of Torah (the Law), Nevi’im (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Books).
106) EJ “Prophets and Prophecy” II 51. UJC “Prophets and Prophecy” 658.
107) *EJ* “Prophets and Prophecy” 1176.
109) Boyce in *EI* “Apocalyptic” 155.
110) Yasht 13:94.
111) The term *saôshyant* is, according to Nyberg 1937:258, derived from the verb *sav*-, which also is at the root for the noun *savah* (*sava*) “salvation through the ordeal.” The term *saôshyant* could be translated as “the one who provides savah (salvation),” in other words, a “saviour.” Gnoli *ER* 69 translates *saôshyant* as “future benefactor”
113) Nyberg 1937: 337, my translation.
114) Yasht 14.
115) Nyberg 1937:78.
116) Nyberg 1937:82, my translation.
119) Literally “mortal life.” See also *ER* “Zoroastrianism” 584.
120) *Yashts* 19:86-96 and *Yasna* 46:3.
121) Gnoli *ER* 69. See also Gnoli’s article in *ER* “Zoroastrianism” 586.
123) Nyberg 1937:259.
124) Gnoli *ER* 69.
125) Boyce *EI* “Apocalyptic” 156.
128) According to Boyce 1978:42 the name is derived “after Zoroaster’s own words: ‘May righteousness be embodied,’” which can be found in *Yasht* 43:16. Gnoli *ER*:586 translates Astvatera as “he who embodies truth.”
129) Nyberg 1937:32, my translation. See also 341-343.
130) Nyberg 1937:259.
132) According to the Sri Lankan sources, *Dipavansa* and the *Mahâvansa*, the dates Buddha’s life can be estimated as 624-544 B.C.E. However, other sources (Chinese and Indian) estimate the dates 448-368 B.C.E. Thus, the discrepancies ranges to up to almost two hundred years! See *ER* 321.
133) Parrinder 1970:149.
135) *ER* 327.
136) By using simple arithmetic and calculating 500 (incarnations) x 80 years (an expected life-time) would amount to a time frame of a minimum of 40,000 years!
139) Parrinder 1970:173, my emphasis. This passage is reminiscent of Lord Krishna’s statement in the *Bhagava Gita* 4:5-8.
140) Cf. the *Mahâvadâna Sutta* (Discourse on the Great Legend) and the *Samyutta Nikâya* which mention seven Buddhas (except Maitreya).
143) Quoted in Lamb 1994:14. Cf. The *Avatamsaka Sûtra* which states that “Within each atom are inconceivably many Buddhas.”
The Tirthankaras are usually only male (according to the Digambaras), but the nineteenth, Malli, is a female (according to the Shvetambaras).


“From a verb trí, to cross over, attain, save, with the prefix ava, down; and so ava-trí, descend into appear, become incarnate.” Parrinder 1970:19. It is interesting here to note that the verb trí also can mean “save.” Thus, even from an etymological point of view, to label the avatars as “soteriological mediators” appears to be fair.

See Abegg 1928:39 and Parrinder 1970:20. According to Parrinder 1970:71 even such a late work as the Harivansha “speaks of an incarnation as a ‘manifestation’ (pradārbhāva) rather than avatāra, which is a popular term.” Parrinder 1970:230, 226 further states that “It is a modern Hindu belief that the Avatāras are…manifestations of God in them” or that they are “theophanies, manifestations of the divine in visible form.” It is also important to note that not all Hindus believe in the avatar-scheme as depicted in the classical texts. Parrinder 1970:100 writes that some of the modern Indian movements, e.g. Prarthana Samaj states that ‘God does not incarnate himself’ and that according to the Arya Samaj ‘the doctrine of avatāras, or divine incarnations, is denied’.

Rishabha is the first Jaina tirthankara.

Omitting Shaikhism and Bābism due to lack of space, but still noting that both of these enumerate the identical prophets as Islam above.

As was noted earlier Gayó-maretan was referred to as “primordial man,” Adam is also sometimes, e.g., Promulgation of Universal Peace:229, seen in the Bahá’í Faith as the progenitor of mankind.

Shoghi Effendi God Passes By:94-95 claims that Bahá’u’lláh is the fulfillment of the Zoroastrian expected savior Sháh Bahram. For a more in-depth analysis of this relationship see Buck 1998.

Shoghi Effendi God Passes By:94 claims that Bahá’u’lláh is the fulfillment of the Hindu expected savior Kalkin (“reincarnation of Krisna”) and the Buddhist Maîtreya (“fifth Buddha”). For a more in-depth analysis of this relationship see Buck 1981, 1986.

One explanation of this could be that Manichaeism was a religion that ultimately “failed.”

“Confucius was not a Prophet. It is quite correct to say he is the founder of a moral system and a great reformer.” Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, p. 41.

From al-Mahdî (the guided one) and which refers, according to the twelfth Imám of the twelver Shi‘ah, Muhammad b. Hasan al-“Askari (b. 869), also known as Muhammad al-Mahdi. The Mahdî is also known as al-Qi‘im (the one who will arise, the ariser), al-Muntazár (the awaited one), al-Qi‘im al-Muntazár (the awaited Qi‘im), al-Hujja (the Proof), Sihih al-Amr (Master of Command), Sihih al-Zamán (Master of the Age). Other frequent terms that are related with the reappearance of the Mahdî are qi‘idm (rise), qi‘idma (resurrection), zuhúr (appearance, emergence), raj‘a (return) and dhurâj (coming forth). See Sachedinia 1981; Halm 1991, EI “AL-MAHDS.”

The religion of Mání and the subsequent development of Manichaeism was in itself a great example of a highly syncretistic religion, combining elements from both the Judeo-Christian and Zoroastrian traditions. See e.g., Widengren 1945, 1973; Lieu 1985, 1994.


Widengren 1945:66.

Buck 1981: footnote 9, emphasis original.

However, the influence of the idea of the chain of prophecy must not be seen as a direct and unilinear process of influence. Fowler 1982:43 makes an important point in this context: “In generic resemblance, the direct line of descent is not so dominant
that the gene theory can be identified with source criticism. We need to leave room for polygenesis . . . and for more remote influences . . . Codes often come to a writer indirectly, deviously, remotely, at haphazard, rather than by simple chronological lines of descent.”

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