

Parallels in the Ministries of Táhírih and Paul

JoAnn M. Borovicka

Táhírih, a woman born into the Islamic religion in the nineteenth-century Persian Empire, is the most renowned heroine of the earliest days of the Bahá'í Faith.¹ Paul, a man born into the Jewish religion in the first century Roman Empire, is the most prominent apostle in the early history of Christianity.² Táhírih and Paul are separated by gender, religion, nationality, culture, and eighteen hundred years. And yet, when stories of their lives and apostolic ministries are compared, parallels arise—the most significant of which is that both are known for singular initiatives that helped differentiate new Revelation from the old: Táhírih played a central role in distinguishing the Bahá'í Revelation³ from Islam, while Paul played a central role in distinguishing the Christian Revelation from Judaism. This and additional parallels regarding their conversions, the challenges they faced, and some of the circumstances of their ministries are surprisingly harmonic. The purpose of this paper is to point out nine parallels in the ministries of Táhírih and Paul and to reflect on the value of this knowledge in interfaith dialogue.

Parallel 1: A Vision of the Manifestation of God before Conversion⁴

Both Táhirih and Paul had a vision of the Manifestation of God prior to acceptance of the new Revelation. Táhirih's vision and conversion came shortly after the Báb's Declaration while Paul's came years after Christ was crucified. We will look at Táhirih's story first.

Táhirih ("the Pure One") is a title given by Bahá'u'lláh to Fátimih Baraghání⁵ who was born about 1817 in Qazvín, Persia, to a family well placed in traditional Islam: her father was a mujtahid⁶ and her paternal uncle was the leader of prayers in the cathedral mosque. Although the culture in which she lived generally denied education to girls, Táhirih's father educated her from childhood. She excelled in Islamic studies and literature and was a master of Arabic and Persian. 'Abdu'l Bahá states: "*Such was the degree of her scholarship and attainments that her father would often express his regret, saying, 'Would that she had been a boy, for he would have shed illumination upon my household, and would have succeeded me!'*" [MF 188]

As a young adult, Táhirih was inspired to investigate the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í and Siyyid Kázim-i-Rashtí— forerunners of the Báb who taught the imminent coming of the Qá'im in the Shaykhi school of the Shi'ah sect of Islam—even though this greatly agitated her family [MF 189]. In 1844 she set out on a journey to study with Siyyid Kázim in person, but he passed away before she arrived. She continued to follow his last instructions to his disciples to "*Go forth... and seek out your Lord*" [MF 190]. It was in the course of her religious disciplines to this end that she had a vision of the Báb in a dream. 'Abdu'l-Bahá relays her experience:

In her vision a youth, a Siyyid, wearing a black cloak and a green turban, appeared to her in the heavens; he was standing in the air, reciting verses and praying with his hands upraised. At once, she memorized one of those

verses, and wrote it down in her notebook when she awoke. After the Báb had declared His mission, and His first book, "The Best of Stories"⁷ was circulated, Táhirih was reading a section of the text one day, and she came upon that same verse, which she had noted down from the dream. Instantly offering thanks, she fell to her knees and bowed her forehead to the ground, convinced that the Báb's message was truth. [MF 190]

Táhirih sent a letter to the Báb declaring her belief. When it was received the Báb declared her an apostle—one of His Eighteen Letters of the Living. Táhirih was the only woman to achieve that station.

Paul's mystical vision and conversion happened quite differently. Paul, also called Saul, was born around 5 A.D. to a Jewish family in the Hellenistic Diaspora; he describes himself as "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee."⁸ Nothing is known of his early education, but New Testament scholars report that through analysis of his letters it is evident that Paul was educated in Greek rhetoric and philosophy as well as Hebrew and many fields of Jewish teachings—this at a time when most people were illiterate.⁹

As a young adult, Paul believed that the Jesus-movement was a dangerously heretical sect and he participated in the persecution of its followers.¹⁰ Paul's conversion, which took place a few years after the crucifixion, is described in the Book of Acts as a vision of and conversation with Christ that came to him suddenly as he was travelling to Damascus—a vision so powerful that it knocked him off his horse and blinded him for three days.¹¹ Whether Paul was physically or figuratively knocked off his horse we don't know, but according to his Second Letter to the Corinthians (which is widely believed by biblical scholars to be an authentic letter of Paul's¹²), he did have a vision of Christ and he was transformed.¹³ From a

persecutor of the Jesus-movement, Paul became a persecuted follower of Jesus Christ.

Paul's calling as an apostle was surprising. The gospels report that Jesus chose twelve men as apostles in His lifetime: Simon (also called Peter), Andrew, James, John, Phillip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Simon, and Judas Iscariot. Paul never met Jesus in person and Paul was not one of these initial twelve; but, through this and other visions, Paul believed himself commissioned by God as an apostle of Christ and empowered to speak with authority to individuals and communities in the Jesus-movement.¹⁴ Was this legitimate? In a reference to Paul 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Physical nearness or remoteness [to the Manifestation] is of no importance; the essential fact is the spiritual affinity and ideal nearness. Judas Iscariot was for a long time favored in the holy court of His Holiness Christ, yet he was entirely far and remote; while Paul, the apostle, was in close embrace with His Holiness. [TAB 3 719-20]

Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to confirm Paul's inspiration.

It is interesting that Táhirih's vision reinforced the spiritual path that she was investigating, while Paul's vision resulted in a radical reorientation of his beliefs—yet both visions resulted in conversions of prominent apostles in the new Revelations.

Parallel 2: Distinguishing New Revelation from the Old

The most significant parallel between Táhirih and Paul, and the factor that sets them apart from all of the other apostles in the Bahá'í and Christian Dispensations, is that both are recognized for singular initiatives that contributed significantly to distinguishing new Revelation from the old.

In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá introduces Táhirih as *a burning brand of the love of God, a lamp of His bestowal* [MF 190]. One of the functions of this “lamp” was to be the point from which some of the most challenging features of the Bahá’í Revelation shone the earliest and brightest. The most famous demonstration of Táhirih’s unique role in this regard took place at the Conference of Badasht, a meeting of eighty-one leaders early in the Bábí movement in 1848.¹⁵ One of the primary purposes of this conference was to address the question of the Báb’s precise claim. This was necessary because at that time the Báb’s spiritual station, how His teachings related to Islam, and what the Bábí movement required on a social level was not fully disclosed. In the early years of the Báb’s Dispensation, many people, Muslims and Bábís alike, understood the teachings of the Báb to be a reform movement of Islam—part of the Shaykhi school of the Shiah sect of Islam. At the Conference of Badasht, Bahá’u’lláh, at this time a leader in the Cause of the Báb, revealed a new Tablet every day, gradually educating the Báb’s followers on the distinctiveness of the Báb’s teachings. But it was through Táhirih’s announcement, supported and protected by Bahá’u’lláh and Quddús, that the new Dispensation’s break with the past was unmistakably demonstrated.¹⁶ Speaking of Táhirih’s unique role, the Guardian states:

It was owing to her initiative, while participating in the Conference of Badasht, that the most challenging implications of a revolutionary and as yet but dimly grasped Dispensation were laid bare before her fellow-disciples and the new Order permanently divorced from the laws and institutions of Islam. [GPB 74]

Táhirih is often noted as a champion of the emancipation of women, but here we see that her function in the Bahá’í Revelation was much broader—Táhirih is attributed with publicly proclaiming the emancipation of the Báb’s movement

from Islam and announcing the Advent of a new Day. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the happening:

Táhirih, with her face unveiled, stepped from her garden, advancing to the pavilion of Bahá’u’lláh; and as she came, she shouted aloud these words: “The Trumpet is sounding! The great Trump is blown! The universal Advent is now proclaimed!” The believers gathered in that tent were panic struck, and each one asked himself, “How can the Law be abrogated? How is it that this woman stands here without her veil?” [MF 198]

Explaining the magnitude of Táhirih’s action, the Guardian states: On that memorable day the “Bugle” mentioned in the Qur’án was sounded, the “stunning trumpet-blast” was loudly raised... The call she sounded was the death-knell of the twelve hundred year old law of Islam” [GPB 33-34]. The message is unmistakably clear that through her initiative Táhirih contributed significantly to establishing the distinction between the early Bahá’í Revelation and Islám.

Paul carried out a similar role, albeit in a different fashion, in the early days of the Christian Revelation. At the time of Christ there were many sects of Judaism in the Roman Empire. These included the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots, the Essenes, and the Jesus-movement.¹⁷ Just as the early Bábí movement was considered a sect of Islam, so the early Jesus-movement was considered a sect of Judaism. In today’s literature, these early Jewish followers of Jesus are often referred to as ‘Jewish Christians.’¹⁸ The Jewish Christians believed in Jesus as the Messiah (the Christ), believed His teachings confirmed Judaism and the Jewish Law (also called Mosaic Law or the Torah), and followed the traditional Jewish rites and ceremonies of purification such as sacrificial offerings at the Temple, dietary laws, and the law of male circumcision.¹⁹ But the Jews were not the only people attracted to Jesus; Gentiles were also attracted to His teachings.

The word Gentile means clan, tribe, or nations and, as used in the New Testament, it refers to anyone who is not Jewish. Gentiles—the Greeks, Romans, and other nationalities of the Near East—surrounded the Jews who had been a minority religion in that area for several hundred years. Some Gentiles became followers of Jesus Christ and these Gentile Christians differed from the Jewish Christians in that they did not necessarily follow the Jewish ritual and ceremonial laws of purification, particularly the law of male circumcision—a practice which the Greeks and Romans considered a mutilation.²⁰ Of the early followers in the Jesus-movement, the Jewish Christian community was the great majority and many believers within it believed that all of the followers of Christ should follow Jewish Law. Referring to this dynamic, the *Guardian* states: “How great was the obstinacy with which the Jewish converts among the early Christians adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors, and how fervent their eagerness to impose them on the Gentiles!” [WOB 57] As the Gentile Christian community increased, conflict about the responsibility of the members to adhere to Jewish rites and ceremonies also increased.²¹

The question confronting the leaders in the Jesus-movement was: Must a Gentile who wants to join a community of followers of Christ first become a Jew? Of particular interest was the question of male circumcision, because at that time the traditional belief was that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”²² Paul, who had been ministering to Gentile Christian communities for years, argued against this requirement. Paul taught that the law of circumcision as well as other social laws of Judaism were not obligatory for Gentile followers of the Messiah, that Christ brought a new Covenant, and that the disciples should be “ministers of a new Covenant.”²³ Paul taught that salvation for the Gentiles was possible by spiritual transformation through the love of Christ and that Gentile adherence to the law of circumcision was not necessary. As

stated in his Letter to the Galatians: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”²⁴

Some of the leaders in the Jesus-movement disagreed with Paul’s proactive support of Gentile members living outside of the Jewish laws. The Book of Acts states: “Paul had no small dissension and debate with them.”²⁵ But eventually Paul and a small group of Jesus-movement leaders (including Peter) met in Jerusalem and came to the agreement that circumcision would not be required of Gentile members, and that only a few Mosaic Laws would be obligatory: three dietary laws and the prohibition against sexual immorality and idolatry.²⁶ It was understood, however, that the Jewish members of the Jesus-movement would continue with their traditional observance of Jewish law.²⁷ At this point, Paul assumed a greater leadership role in the Gentile mission. In his Letter to the Galatians he states that the outcome of the meeting was “I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised.”²⁸

But the matter was far from settled. There was no universal agreement concerning the nature of the mission to the Gentiles and contention continued in the Jesus-movement: the large “Jewish Christian conservative wing” on one side and the small “Gentile Christian liberal wing” on the other.²⁹ Some of the Jewish followers saw the Gentiles as ritually unclean, and there was a tone of Gentile subordination. Meanwhile, Paul preached that these two groups could exist together respectfully in one community.³⁰ In his Letter to the Galatians he states: “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”³¹

Eventually, Paul, on his own authority, abrogated the three dietary laws that had been made obligatory for Gentile Christians by the leadership in Jerusalem [SAQ 20:2]. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire cultivating Jesus-movement communities open to all, encouraging lovers of Jesus Christ to work together in unity. Over time, the Jewish Christian sect of

Judaism declined and virtually disappeared. It was the Gentile Christian movement championed by Paul that increased to a new, international, and separate religion—Christianity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises this outcome. He states: “*Observe how numerous were the diverse nations, races, clans, and tribes who, after the advent of Christ, gathered through the power of the love of God under the shadow of His Word*” [SAQ 84:5]. Although the distinction of Christianity as a separate religion did not fully evolve until decades after Paul’s martyrdom, it is widely acknowledged in Christian scholarship that Paul is most responsible for this outcome because it was Paul who championed the Gentile mission outside of the laws of the Torah—during his thirty-year ministry as well as through several of his letters that were preserved over centuries.³²

In Bahá’í history, Táhirih’s role as the ‘trumpet’ of the new Advent is presented as beginning suddenly with her dramatic announcement at the conference of Badasht. She then continued with the same message in her personal teaching until her martyrdom four years later. Conversely, in Christian history, Paul’s role as the champion of the new Advent was not focused on a specific event or dramatic announcement, but was, from the beginning, a slow process of teaching—in various localities over a thirty-year period and over centuries through his letters—what he believed he had been chosen by God to declare: that Gentiles could find salvation in Christ without adhering to Jewish rites and ceremonies. Although achieved in different ways, in their respective religions both Táhirih and Paul are recognized as *the* apostles whose singular initiatives contributed significantly to distinguishing the new Revelation from the old.

Parallel 3: Brilliant Communicators

Táhirih and Paul were both brilliant communicators. Most of Táhirih’s writings were destroyed after her martyrdom; however, the Guardian describes the variety and influence of her communications. He states: “Through her eloquent pleadings,

her fearless denunciations, her dissertations, poems and translations, her commentaries and correspondence, she persisted in firing the imagination, enlisting the allegiance of Arabs and Persians alike to the new Revelation” [GPB 73]. Táhirih was so effective in her teaching that certain religious authorities became alarmed and lodged complaints. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that when challenged by religious leaders “*she presented them with unanswerable proofs, and when one or another appeared before her she offered him convincing arguments*” [MF 192].

Despite Táhirih’s restricted travel and her short eight-year ministry, some of her writings, particularly her poetry, traveled outside of the Persian Empire. This was made possible in part by nineteenth-century Western interest in Orientalism, new communication technologies, and a lively culture of international journalism. The Guardian states: “The fame of this immortal woman was noised abroad, and traveling with remarkable swiftness as far as the capitals of Western Europe, aroused the enthusiastic admiration and evoked the ardent praise of men and women of divers nationalities, callings and cultures” [GPB 75]. Martha Root, a Bahá’í teacher who made numerous trips around the world in the 1920s and 30s reported: “I have seen the influence of Táhirih in all the five continents I had visited.”³³

The proof of the effectiveness of Paul’s communications is in the outcome of his ministry. He made numerous travel-teaching trips throughout the Roman Empire where he established several major centers of Christian activity. He nurtured these communities with lengthy visits, but when problems arose and he could not be there in person he wrote letters to advise and encourage. Many of his letters were preserved; seven of the Epistles in the New Testament are considered by most scholars to be authentically Pauline; they may also represent the earliest Christian writings in existence.³⁴ By virtue of his letters, modern scholars describe Paul as a literary genius, a conveyor of eternal verities, and one of the

most influential figures in the West.³⁵ His letters, which are still the focus of intense study, are revered as Scripture in the New Testament of the Christian Bible—the most published as well as the most widely distributed book in the history of civilization.

Parallel 4: Vilified from Within

Both Táhirih and Paul were vilified from within their respective new religious communities. Persecution from those outside of the new Faith was a tragic reality in the Apostolic Age of both the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity, and this was something that Táhirih and Paul endured with most of the early believers. But being vilified by many of one's co-religionists is something that sets Táhirih and Paul apart.

Concerning the vilification that Táhirih suffered, the *Guardian* states: "The trumpeter was a lone woman, the noblest of her sex in that Dispensation, whom even some of her co-religionists pronounced a heretic" [GPB 33-34]. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Táhirih's outspoken teaching activities so alarmed her more rigid fellow-believers that they complained to the Báb that her behavior was immoral. In the *Dawn-Breakers* it is reported that "The Báb, to whom these complaints had been addressed, replied in the following terms: 'What am I to say regarding her whom the Tongue of Power and Glory has named Táhirih?'" [DB 293] The Báb defended the truth of Táhirih's words and confirmed her station as "the Pure One."

Like Táhirih, Paul suffered attacks from his co-religionists. His doctrine of a new Covenant with God through Christ conflicted with certain Jewish Christians who infiltrated Gentile Christian communities causing confusion and dissension and undermining Paul's authority.³⁶ Biblical scholar Paul Segal notes: "Almost no Pauline letter forgets to mention Paul's status as an apostle through God, underlining his constant need to establish his credentials."³⁷ In 2 Corinthians Paul names many of the dangers that he faced in his ministry including "danger from false brothers and sisters"³⁸—those being fellow believers early

in the Jesus-movement who tried to sabotage his Torah-free Gentile mission. Acknowledging Paul's constant struggles, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "*In Saint Paul's own time no one duly recognized him; nay, rather, he spent his days amidst difficulties and contempt.*"³⁹ Thus, both Táhirih and Paul were persecuted from without and vilified from within.

Parallel 5: Appeals to the Government

Another similarity between Táhirih and Paul is that both made successful appeals to governmental authorities. In *Memorials of the Faithful* 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions three occasions where Táhirih wrote to government officials with requests. In all three cases her correspondence was heard, action was taken, and the outcome was what she desired. First, she wrote to the Governor of Karbilá informing him of her location when she learned that the authorities had arrested Shamsu'd-Duhá, believing Shams was Táhirih. In this case, Shams was released and Táhirih was arrested as she requested [MF 191]. Second, she wrote again to the Governor of Karbilá when the house arrest he had ordered had gone on for months with no confirmation from higher authorities. She requested to go to Baghdad to await an answer there—the governor gave his consent [MF 192-194]. Third, she wrote to the Governor of Kirmánsháh when she and her companions were assaulted and abandoned in the desert by Kirmánsháh officials [MF 194]. The governor commanded that their belongings be returned and they be allowed to continue on their journey.

Traditions recorded in the Book of Acts have Paul successfully appealing to government authorities as well. In Philippi, Paul and a companion, Silas, were thrown in jail without a trial. When an earthquake mysteriously opened the prison and the nervous magistrates ordered that the two prisoners be quietly released, Paul refused to leave and, instead, made a demand for an official governmental apology—which he got.⁴⁰ Second, when Paul's teaching in Jerusalem agitated the

people and this accelerated to mob violence, he was arrested by the Roman centurions who were going to take him to the barracks to flog him for disturbing the peace. Paul reportedly asked the rhetorical question: “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?”⁴¹ Consequently he was taken to Caesarea in safety to await trial before the governor. And third, after Paul had remained in Caesarea for some time with no trial decision, he appealed to be tried before the Emperor in Rome. The appeal was granted and Paul was transported to Rome where he was able to teach from “his house” while awaiting trial.⁴²

Although these stories concerning Paul relayed in the Book of Acts may not have the historical accuracy of Táhirih’s biography, it is noteworthy that these particular stories withstood the test of time: there is something important about the example of religious visionaries making direct appeals to the government for justice.

Parallel 6: Rescued by Small Bands of Co-religionists

In the histories of both faiths there are stories of coordinated efforts by a few of Táhirih’s and Paul’s co-religionists to rescue them from certain death early in their ministries.

Táhirih was rescued in 1847 while she was under house arrest in Qazvín under false charges of being complicit in the murder of her uncle, Mullá Taqí. The Mullá’s heirs were demanding her death. By Bahá’u’lláh’s direction, Táhirih left the house at night in the company of a fellow believer, met another friend who had horses outside of the city gates, and rode with her rescuers to Bahá’u’lláh’s house in Tihrán. Describing this event ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “*They managed by a stratagem to free her from that embroilment and got her to Tihrán in the night*” [MF 197]. She went on to teach for another five years.

Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, as well as the Book of Acts, reports a similar situation. When Paul was teaching in

Damascus his co-religionists learned that the governor intended to have him killed, and that government officials were monitoring the city gates day and night in order to capture him. To rescue Paul from certain death “His disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the city wall, lowering him in a basket.”⁴³ This enabled Paul to get out of Damascus alive and to continue in his thirty-year ministry.

These stories of coordinated rescues speak to the prominence of Táhirih and Paul’s positions and their importance in these early religious communities.

Parallel 7: Never Attained the Physical Presence of Her/His Lord

It is surprising that neither Táhirih nor Paul attained the physical presence of her/his Lord. Although Táhirih lived during the time of the Báb, communicated with Him in writing, and was one of His specially designated Letters of the Living, she never attained the Báb’s presence in earthly form [MF 188-200]. Similarly, Paul lived during Jesus’ physical lifetime but never met Him in person. Paul became a follower of Christ after the crucifixion, and there is no record of His having met Jesus before his conversion.⁴⁴

Parallel 8: Contributed to the Process of Realizing the Equality of Women and Men

Traditionally, Táhirih and Paul would be seen as polar opposites on the issue of gender equity. Because of Táhirih’s investigation of truth independent from her father and husband, her participation in religious debates, her challenges to religious authority, her teaching of men and women alike, and her overall courageous disregard for cultural gender restrictions, she was the very embodiment of the promotion of a radical gender equity for her day [MF 188-200]. By virtue of her initiatives the Guardian states that she was “the first woman

suffrage martyr” [GPB 75]. Paul, on the other hand, is traditionally associated with biblical verses that uphold a strict patriarchy.⁴⁵ However, modern New Testament scholarship has discovered reasons to vindicate Paul to the degree that many now recognize him as a visionary for gender equity.⁴⁶

One key to “liberating Paul”⁴⁷ has been the application of textual analysis⁴⁸ to the thirteen Pauline Letters,⁴⁹ resulting in the discovery of what many scholars believe to be pseudonymous letters in the Pauline collection; that is, letters claiming Pauline authorship that were not written by Paul himself.^{50,51} These pseudonymous letters include 1 Timothy, home to this notorious verse: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”⁵² Like this passage, many of the patriarchal messages that were once believed to present Paul’s teachings are found in what, now, are largely believed to be inauthentic or disputed letters.⁵³

Another key to the “new Paul”⁵⁴ of modern scholarship is the identification of what many scholars believe are interpolated verses in the authentic Pauline Letters; that is, passages added to Paul’s letters by an unknown author or authors some time after his death.⁵⁵ One example of a suspected interpolated verse is this passage in First Corinthians that echoes the sentiment cited above in First Timothy: “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”⁵⁶ A widespread claim, and one that is supported by textual criticism, asserts that the above passage was added to First Corinthians decades after Paul’s death. This and other patriarchal teachings attributed to Paul after his martyrdom are seen by Karen Elliott and other scholars as “sad evidence to how quickly the Church retreated from Paul’s more egalitarian practice” in the decades after his martyrdom.⁵⁷ While in the Bahá’í Writings there is no commentary on possible

interpolations in or the authenticity of any of the Pauline Letters, it is the personal opinion of this author that the prevailing scholarship on this topic—which supports the identification of certain inauthentic letters as well as interpolated verses—has great integrity. The analysis presented in the rest of this paper is based on that premise.

In addition to scholarship regarding inauthentic letters and interpolations in the Pauline Letters, understanding verses in light of Paul's historical context has assisted in recovering what is widely believed to be Paul's more egalitarian original message. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul declares that a woman should be veiled in meetings when she prays and prophesies, while a man should remain bareheaded. A conventional interpretation of this instruction is that it was an example of Paul's subjugation of women. However, Sara Ruden, a scholar of ancient literature, believes that Paul's insistence on the veiling of women in his churches was a movement toward egalitarianism. At that time the veil was a sign of purity, honor, and authority⁵⁸ that was legally denied less fortunate women such as slaves, prostitutes, or those labeled 'adulteress.' Ruden states:

I think Paul's rule aimed toward an outrageous equality. All Christian women were to cover their heads in church, without distinction of beauty, wealth, [or] respectability... This had never happened in any public gathering before... This, I believe, was Paul's ingenious combination of common sense and radical defiance for dealing with a very touchy set of issues.⁵⁹

It is noteworthy that the rigid roles assigned to women in the verses proven or suspected to be inauthentic contradict Paul's overall egalitarian treatment of women and his authentic teaching that: "There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."⁶⁰ In this verse and others like it, Paul challenges the gender prejudice of his time.⁶¹ There is also evidence that he backed up his teachings in action. Although

surrounded by a religious culture that denied women leadership roles, Paul's authenticated letters demonstrate that he supported the leadership of women. For example, he refers to Priscilla as a "fellow worker in Christ,"⁶² Euodia and Syntyche are described as "co-workers" whose names "are recorded in the book of life,"⁶³ Phoebe is named as a "deacon,"⁶⁴ and Junia is praised as an "apostle of Christ."⁶⁵ Paul's genuine letters abound with appreciation for the leadership of women in the early Christian communities. In addition, Paul taught a mutual respect for and responsibility between husband and wife that was revolutionary in his day. For example, he states, "In the Lord, woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman."⁶⁶ And "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband."⁶⁷ This was radical teaching in Paul's Hellenistic world where women were considered property in marriage.

In short, the arguments supporting the identification of inauthentic letters and interpolations, along with increased consideration of historical context—all of which have resulted in a paradigm shift in modern Pauline studies—present substantial evidence that a "new perspective on Paul"⁶⁸ is justified; one that recognizes him as being progressive for his day in the area of social justice, including gender equity. From the point of view of studies on the "new Paul," contributing to the process of the realization of the equality of women and men is something that Táhirih and Paul have in common.

Parallel 9: Martyrdom During the Time of Wholesale Massacre of Early Believers

If tradition faithfully carries the truth of Paul's death, he and Táhirih may share another parallel—martyrdom at a time of wholesale massacre of early believers.

Táhirih was martyred during the time of the slaughter of the followers of the Báb after the attempt on the life of the Sháh in August of 1852. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

Thus she remained, a helpless captive. Then came the attempt on the life of the Sháh;⁶⁹ a farman was issued; she was sentenced to death. Saying she was summoned to the Prime Minister's, they arrived to lead her away from the Kalantar's house. She bathed her face and hands, arrayed herself in a costly dress, and scented with attar of roses she came out of the house.

They brought her into a garden, where the headsmen waited; but these wavered and then refused to end her life. A slave was found, far gone in drunkenness; besotted, vicious, black of heart. And he strangled Táhirih. He forced a scarf between her lips and rammed it down her throat. Then they lifted up her unsullied body and flung it in a well, there in the garden, and over it threw down earth and stones. But Táhirih rejoiced; she had heard with a light heart the tidings of her martyrdom; she set her eyes on the supernal Kingdom and offered up her life. [MF 200]

While the circumstances of Táhirih's martyrdom are known, there is no official record of Paul's passing. However, it is traditionally believed that Paul was martyred around 64 A.D. after the burning of Rome during the slaughter of Christians ordered by Emperor Nero.⁷⁰ A passage in *1 Clement*, an early Christian letter written from Rome to the Corinthians, suggests that Paul was killed in Rome. The letter states:

Through jealousy and strife, Paul showed the way to the prize of endurance; seven times he was in bonds, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a herald both in the East and in the West, he gained the noble fame of his faith, he taught righteousness to all the world, and when he had reached the limits of the West he gave his testimony [*martyrēsas*, or "was martyred"] before the rulers, and thus passed from the world and was taken up into the Holy Place—the greatest example of endurance.⁷¹

Although not corroborated by numerous sources, it is a common “historical guess” that “Paul, and presumably Peter as well, died among those many Christians martyred by Nero in 64 A.D.”⁷² Both Táhirih and Paul suffered for their Cause; Táhirih suffered martyrdom, and it is traditionally believed that Paul suffered martyrdom as well.

In summary, both Táhirih and Paul:

1. Had mystical visions of the Manifestation of God before their conversions.
2. Are recognized for singular initiatives that contributed significantly to distinguishing the new Revelation from the old.
3. Were brilliant communicators.
4. Were vilified from within their respective new religious communities.
5. Made successful appeals to government authorities.
6. Were rescued by small bands of co-religionists early in their ministries.
7. Never attained the physical presence of her/his Lord.
8. Contributed to the process of realizing the equality of women and men.
9. Táhirih suffered martyrdom; tradition holds that Paul was also martyred.

Conclusion

A Type of Early Apostle—This Time, a Woman

The parallels in the ministries of Táhirih and Paul paint a picture of a type of early apostle who bears much of the burden of distinguishing new Revelation from the old: a pure channel with the capacity to envision a new kind of community; a

person of action at once valued by and threatening to his or her co-religionists; a kind of maverick in the new religious order. It is notable that this role—which in the Christian Dispensation was accomplished by a man—was, in the Bahá'í Dispensation, carried out by a woman. Táhirih's ministry is evidence that spiritual qualities and capacities of service know no gender restrictions.

Knowledge Leads to Unity

In the Persian Bayán the Báb describes the Letters of the Living as the first to have knelt before the throne of God:

Let there be no doubt that man's glory is in testifying unto God's unity, in recognizing Him, acknowledging His justice, obeying Him and seeking His good pleasure. It is, however, certain that these sacred souls have attained, before anyone else, unto that which is the quintessence of all excellence and glory. Further, there can be no doubt that they were the first Lights who bowed down before God, accepted the verses He hath revealed unto His Báb, and proclaimed them to the world. (Persian Bayán 1:2⁷³)

The spiritual station of the Letters of the Living is unimaginably glorious—they inspire love, admiration, and humility in the Bahá'í community. It is especially interesting, then, that the Báb continues His commentary by stating that the Letters of the Living are the return of the spiritual qualities of the holy souls of *each Dispensation* before them:

They are the lights which in the past have eternally prostrated themselves and will prostrate themselves eternally in the future, before the celestial throne. In each Dispensation, they are called by different names amongst the people, and in each Revelation, their individual names are also changed. Yet, the names of

their inmost realities, which refer unto God, are manifest in their hearts. [Persian Bayán 1:2⁷⁴]

Although there is no direct comparison of Táhírih and Paul in the Bahá'í Writings, the concept of the Letters of the Living as the return of the spiritual qualities of the first believers of past Dispensations seems to be demonstrated in their ministries. In several ways, Táhírih and Paul carried out similar functions, rose to similar challenges, and, in doing so, demonstrated similar spiritual qualities. The principle of progressive revelation recognizes every Manifestation of God as the spiritual return of the Manifestations of the past [KI 152]; according to the above passages from the Bayán, we might also understand the apostles in any religious history to be the “return” of the spiritual qualities of the apostles before them. To reflect on this point—that the beloved figures in one’s religious history are, in a spiritual sense, the return of the beloved figures of other religious traditions—could be a helpful step toward unity. Because of their affinity in mission, circumstances, and spiritual qualities, to love and revere Táhírih is, in a sense, to love and revere Paul. In the same sense, to love and revere Mulláh Husayn, Quddús, Vahid, and all of the Letters of the Living is to love and revere Peter, Phillip, James, and all of the Apostles of Christ.

When reaching out in goodwill to those of different religious traditions, there is, perhaps, no better strategy than to authentically love and revere the spiritual giants of those traditions. Bahá'u'lláh states: “*Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you*” [GWB CXI]. Knowledge of the parallels in the ministries of Táhírih and Paul is valuable because these parallels remind us of the shared spiritual ancestry of the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity and prompt us to hold onto that unity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Loveday. “Acts” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Barton, John and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 1028-1061.
- Balyuzi, H. M. *Eminent Bahá'ís in the Time of Bahá'u'lláh*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1985.
- Balyuzi, H. M. *The Báb—The Herald of the Days*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1973.
- Barclay, John. “1 Corinthians” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1108-1133.
- Beker, J. Christaan. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.
- Borg, Marcus J. and John Dominic Crossan. *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.
- Bristow, John T. *What Paul Really Said About Women: The Apostle's Liberating Views on Equality in Marriage, Leadership, and Love*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Cameron, Glenn and Wendi Momen. *A Basic Bahá'í Chronology*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1996; www.bahai-library.com/chronology.
- Crossan, John Dominic and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom. A New Vision of Paul's Words & World*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004.
- Donaldson, Terence L. “Introduction to the Pauline Corpus” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1062-1083.
- Drury, Clare. “The Pastoral Epistles” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1220-1233.
- Dunn, J. D. G. “Ephesians” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1165-1179.
- Elliott, Karen M. *Women in Ministry and the Writings of Paul*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2010.
- Elliott, Neil. *Liberating Paul—The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.

- Esler, Philip F. “2 Thessalonians” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 11213-1220.
- Gager, John G. *Reinventing Paul*. Oxford: University Press, 2000.
- Gulpaygani, Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl. *The Brilliant Proofs*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997.
- Hill, Craig C. “Romans” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1083-1108.
- Luedemann, Gerd. *Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles: Studies in Chronology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- MacDonald, Margaret. “2 Corinthians” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. Barton, John and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 1134-1151.
- Murphy-O’Connor, OP. “Colossians” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1191-1199.
- Nakhjavání, Bahiyyih. *Asking Questions—A Challenge to Fundamentalism*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1990.
- Root, Martha. *Táhirih the Pure*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1981.
- Ruden, Sarah. *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. New York: Pantheon, 2010.
- Saiedi, Nader. *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995.
- Schnelle, Udo. *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Segal, Alan F. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*. Vol. 2. Oxford: George Ronald, 1977.
- Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*. Vol. 3. Oxford: George Ronald, 1983.
- Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1992.
- Universal House of Justice. Memorandum written by the Research Department of the Bahá’í World Centre. “Whether the Apostle Paul was a False Teacher.” 22 February 1998.

Universal House of Justice. Memorandum written by the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre. 10 January 1988.

Wills, Garry. *What Paul Meant*. NY: Viking, 2006.

Wyschogrod, Michael. "A Jewish View of Christianity," in *Toward a Theological Encounter—Jewish Understanding of Christianity*, Ed. Leon Klenicki. NY: Paulist Press, 1991.

NOTES

¹ Describing Táhirih's high spiritual station, the Guardian states that Táhirih is, along with Bahiyyih Khánum, *comparable in rank to those immortal heroines: Sarah, Ásíyih, the Virgin Mary, [and] Fátimah*. [GPB 75; MBW 74]

² Paul is mentioned favorably in the Bahá'í Writings: Bahá'u'lláh refers to him as *Saint Paul* [ESW 91]; 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, *One's conduct must be like the conduct of Paul* [SWAB 189.5]; and in a London talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to him as *Saint Paul the Great Apostle* [ABL 23]. In the opinion of biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, "Paul is second only to Jesus as the most important person in the origins of Christianity."² [Borg and Crossan, p. 1; See also Donaldson, p. 1062; Hill, p. 1083]

³ "The Bahá'í community ... has its origins in the Bábí movement, a religion which began in Iran in 1844. Its founder, Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad Shirazi, who took the title the Báb (1819–1850), was executed in 1850 in the midst of a general persecution of the Bábís that culminated in a general massacre in 1852. In about 1866, Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Nuri (1817–1892), who took the title Bahá'u'lláh, openly claimed to be the religious leader prophesied by the Báb in his writings. Since more than 90% of the surviving Bábís became followers of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís, at about this time, it is legitimate from the sociological and historical view-point to regard these two movements, the Bábís and the Bahá'ís, as one movement: the Bahá'í Faith" [Momen, p. 221].

⁴ In this paper, by "conversion" is meant the recognition and following of the Manifestation of God in a new Revelation, not the denial or rejection of the traditional religion. (Concerning the nature of Paul's conversion, see Segal, p. 117, 129-30; Gager, p. 53)

⁵ Táhirih is also known as Qurratu'l-'Ayn ("Solace of the Eyes") and Zarrin-Taj ("Crown of Gold").

⁶ Mujtahid: an Islamic religious leader.

⁷ The "*Ahsánu'l-Qisás*," the Báb's commentary on the *Súrih of Joseph*, was called the *Qur'án of the Bábís*, and was translated from Arabic into Persian by Táhirih [MF 191].

-
- ⁸ Philippians 3:5
- ⁹ Crossan and Reed, p. 75
- ¹⁰ Paul states: “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” [1 Corinthians 15:9].
- ¹¹ Acts 9:1-9
- ¹² Macdonald, pp. 1134-35.
- ¹³ 2 Corinthians 12; More visions followed—Paul refers to visions that he received over a fourteen year period [2 Corinthians 12:2].
- ¹⁴ Segal, p. 70
- ¹⁵ The Conference of Badasht took place from 17 June to 26 July 1848 in the Badasht hamlet in the region of Mazindaran, Persia [GPB 33].
- ¹⁶ In the *Dawn-Breakers* Nabíl describes Táhirih’s announcement as it appeared to the group: an unexpected appearance that aggravated Quddús who represented the more conservative of the believers. However, the Guardian explains that this apparent confrontation was planned by Bahá’u’lláh with Táhirih and Quddús in order to educate the followers of the Báb and still safeguard Táhirih. The Guardian states, “*Quddús, regarded as the exponent of the conservative element within it, affected, in pursuance of a pre-conceived plan designed to mitigate the alarm and consternation which such a conference was sure to arouse, to oppose the seemingly extremist views advocated by the impetuous Táhirih*” [GPB 31]. As stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*there was a wisdom in it*” [MF 2000].
- ¹⁷ Segal, p. 80
- ¹⁸ The terms “Christian” and “Christianity” were not used at the time of Paul. These terms evolved decades after Paul’s ministry [Gager, p. 8].
- ¹⁹ Beker, p. 74
- ²⁰ Ruden, p. xvi
- ²¹ It should be noted that this conflict was within the Jesus-movement itself, not between the Jesus-movement and the Jews. The Jewish communities in the Roman Empire had a history of welcoming Gentile participants (“Gentile synagogue adherents” or “God-fearers”) in services and observances without pressure to convert to Judaism [Borg and Crossan pp. 87-90; also see Gager p. 35].
- ²² Acts 15:1
- ²³ 2 Corinthians 3:6
- ²⁴ Galatians 6:15
- ²⁵ Acts 15:2
- ²⁶ SAQ 20:20; Schnelle, p. 123
- ²⁷ Wyschogrod, p. 119
- ²⁸ Galatians 2:7

-
- ²⁹ Borg & Crossan, p. 217
- ³⁰ Segal, p. 114, 265
- ³¹ Galatians 3:28
- ³² Schnelle, p. 138; Borg and Crossan, p. 2; Segal, p. 161
- ³³ Root, p. 85
- ³⁴ Donaldson, p. 1062
- ³⁵ Beker, pp. 62-63
- ³⁶ Gager, p. 69
- ³⁷ Segal, p. 191
- ³⁸ 2 Corinthians 1
- ³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cited in Balyuzi, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, pp. 353-354
- ⁴⁰ Acts 16
- ⁴¹ Acts 22:25
- ⁴² Acts 28:20, 30
- ⁴³ Acts 9:25
- ⁴⁴ Segal, p. xi, 13, 14
- ⁴⁵ Wills, p. 1; Gager, p. 3-4; Neil Elliott, pp. 3-24
- ⁴⁶ See Wills, pp. 89-104; Borg and Crossan, pp. 48-58; Karen Elliott, pp. 41-65; Neil Elliott, pp. 52-54
- ⁴⁷ Neil Elliot, p. 226; Karen Elliott, pp. 63-65
- ⁴⁸ Factors that are considered in textual analysis include style, language, vocabulary, theology, and historical indicators [see Borg and Crossan pp. 14-15; Dunn, p. 1166; Drury, p. 1220].
- ⁴⁹ The Pauline Letters (Epistles), so named because they begin with Paul’s name and therefore appear to claim Pauline authorship, are, in order of appearance in the New Testament: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.
- ⁵⁰ There is wide agreement in New Testament scholarship that 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Ephesians are pseudonymous letters [Drury, p. 1220; Dunn, p. 1166], while Colossians and 2 Thessalonians are “hotly debated” [Murphy-O’Connor, p. 1191; Esler, p. 1213].
- ⁵¹ J. D. G. Dunn and other scholars describe the pseudonymous letters as understandable considering the accepted tradition of the time of pseudonymously writing in the name of a revered teacher. However, Neil Elliott states that these letters are not typical pseudonymous writings, that is, “transparent fictions”, but are, instead, deliberate forgeries “written to subvert other second-century Christian communities that had preserved elements of Paul’s truth” [Neil Elliott, p. 31].

⁵² 1 Timothy 2:11-12

⁵³ Neil Elliott, p. 21

⁵⁴ Gager, p. 146

⁵⁵ Karen Elliott, pp. 63-64; see also Barclay, p. 1130

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:33-36

⁵⁷ Karen Elliott, p. 65. See also Wills, p. 98; Crossan and Reed, p. 69; Borg and Crossan pp. 48-58; Neil Elliott, pp. 52-54

⁵⁸ To this point, consider: have you ever seen a portrait or sculpture of the Virgin Mary without a veil on her head?

⁵⁹ Ruden, pp. 87-88

⁶⁰ Galatians 3:28

⁶¹ Karen Elliott, pp. 41-6

⁶² Romans 16:3

⁶³ Philippians 4:3

⁶⁴ Romans 16:1

⁶⁵ Romans 16:7

⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:11

⁶⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:3

⁶⁸ Neil Elliott, p. 22

⁶⁹ “On August 15, 1852, a half-crazed Bábí youth wounded the Sháh with shot from a pistol. The assailant was instantly killed” [MF 200].

⁷⁰ Borg and Crossan, pp. 220-221

⁷¹ 1 Clement 5:5-7 cited in Borg and Crossan, pp. 220-221

⁷² Borg and Crossan, p. 222

⁷³ Cited in *Saiedi*, p. 271-272

⁷⁴ Cited in *Saiedi*, p. 272