

A STUDY OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S TABLET TO THE CHRISTIANS

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Michael Sours's scriptural commentary *A Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to the Christians* comes as a welcome addition to Bahá'í scholarship. In the Bahá'í community theology was once approached with great reluctance. Perceived as being "man made,"¹ it was looked upon as a questionable field that contributed in no small measure to great schisms in the world religions. The profusion of Bahá'í sacred scripture, with the many authoritative interpretations by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in books such as *Some Answered Questions* as well as the interpretations of Shoghi Effendi, did away with the need for theology—or so it was thought. However, this view has proven too hasty in the light of current Bahá'í scholarship that continues to produce studies of a theological and metaphysical nature. The reluctance to use the phrase "Bahá'í theology" or "Bahá'í metaphysics" also seems to be waning. Not only Islamic Studies but clearly the study of theology and comparative religion are endorsed in the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of "a thorough knowledge of those complex and transcendental realities pertaining to God . . ." as well as "the contents of the sacred Scriptures of other faiths" point both to theology and comparative religion. He cites these as a partial requirement of "the first attribute of perfection," which he defines as "learning and the cultural attainments of the mind . . ." (*The Secret of Divine Civilization* 35). He elsewhere singles out comparative religion for praise (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 410). The Bahá'í revelation will more likely place theology on a new and firmer footing, purify, and revitalize it, rather than deal it a death blow. The commentary as an adjunct of theology is almost certainly destined to become a genre of its own.

Michael Sours's *Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to the Christians* is, as the title suggests, a commentary on Bahá'u'lláh's most important communication to the Christian community. Commentaries, although they are just beginning to appear in the Bahá'í Faith (at least in the West), have a long history within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The most well-known example is the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, which have existed since the fourth and fifth centuries respectively. Commentaries have the reputation of being tedious reading since they are very thoroughgoing elaborations of text based on the interpretations of one individual. Yet, the well-informed vision of another can be very illuminating. The commentator is a sort of critic (analyst) of the divine Word and can bring a reader into a fuller appreciation of the sacred text when he or she has the wherewithal to supply the historical, scriptural, doctrinal, or linguistic background to the Holy Writ or has done some serious insightful thinking into its content. Michael Sours has done all of this.

1. I first heard the expression "man made" in connection with theology years before the current sensitivity about nonsexist language. While I agree with the principle of nonsexist language, I repeat the expression here without alteration, since it reflects the common parlance at that time.

The Word of God, being entirely autonomous, can do well without commentary as it does, for example, when it is listened to for devotional purposes. Yet it has to be remembered that Holy Writ breaks into the world within a particular religiocultural context and sometimes makes allusions to or through that context. The elements of Sufi thought and language in Bahá'u'lláh's *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* are well-known examples. The Tablet to the Christians is also situated in its own context—the Judaeo-Christian.

Michael Sours's book will make a contribution to the field of Bahá'í-Christian studies and to a more meaningful Christian-Bahá'í dialogue since it deals with some very substantive and controversial issues. It will be of interest to any Christian who is seriously investigating the Bahá'í Faith or to any Bahá'í of Christian background who has some knowledge of the sacred scriptures and an interest in the relationship between the two faiths. It might also prove to be of interest to any Bahá'í who might have entered the Bahá'í Faith by way of the "Return of Christ" avenue.

Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawh-i-Aqdas* (The Most Holy Tablet) usually called *Tablet to the Christians* can be found in its entirety in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (7-17). The tablet is about ten pages in length. For purposes of analysis, the author has divided the text into twenty-four chapters enumerated by Roman rather than Arabic numerals, which is the standard for the King James Version of the Bible as well as for Bahá'u'lláh's *Gleanings*. Sours further subdivides the text into numbered verses.

We cannot say with certainty to whom the tablet was addressed. It may have been revealed in honor of the physician Faris Effendi, the first Christian who converted to the Bahá'í Faith while Bahá'u'lláh's ship made a stopover in Alexandria on its way to 'Akká.

The grand theme of the Tablet is the proclamation to the Christians of Bahá'u'lláh's messianic coming as the Return of Christ. Bahá'u'lláh laments that the Christians have not recognized in Him the Promised Messiah of both Testaments and warns them not to repeat the same mistake that the Pharisees made in rejecting Christ without any clear proof, although they had prayed incessantly for his coming. Bahá'u'lláh also proclaims his Manifestation to the monks, priests, and bishops of Christendom and commands them to leave their life of seclusion for life in the world and to proclaim his name to the nations.

In his chapter and verse analysis of the Tablet to the Christians, Michael Sours's writing style is congenial. His diction is simple, concise, and direct. There is nothing *recherché*. The language is not stilted but flows easily, carrying with it a certain simple elegance. His analysis is neither too detailed nor too erudite and gains, therefore, in directness and readability. He thus manages to avoid the bane of learned commentaries—tediousness. His interpretations are likewise informed, and he supports his analysis with pertinent theological, linguistic, and historical data. He often proves his points with double references to both the New Testament and the Bahá'í writings. His research is often helpful in understanding the symbolic meaning of the text. Here is an example taken from the "Bahá'í Beatitudes," a group of twenty-three verses that conclude the tablet, each one repeating the refrain "Blessed."

XXIV

5 Blessed the distressed one who seeketh refuge
beneath the shadow of My canopy.

COMMENTARY

The 'shadow of My canopy' may be a further extension of the symbolic imagery of the Tabernacle mentioned in the previous verse [XXIV:4]. This 'canopy' could be the upper part of the Tabernacle and therefore could be understood in a similar way to the Tabernacle described in the Bible. Otherwise, it may be an allusion to the fulfillment of yet another prophecy (Isa. 4:5-6). This will be discussed in the commentary to verse XXIV:8. Whether it alludes to the canopy of the Tabernacle or the canopy referred to in Isaiah 4:5-6, a protective covering is suggested which symbolizes God's spiritual protection and the salvation ensured to those who abide by the Word of God. (164)

The commentary also allows its author to draw in a number of issues that are central to the Bahá'í-Christian dialogue such as: the fulfillment of prophecy, the "rapture," and the Return of Christ, the meaning of "earth and heaven," the obstructive role of the clergy in the recognition of the Manifestations of God, the sacrificial roles of Christ and Bahá'u'lláh, persecution and opposition to the new Faith. In so doing, Sours exposes the fallacy of literal interpretation of scripture and makes plain the pathos and tragedy in the Christian community's rejection of its promised Lord—Bahá'u'lláh.

There is one major drawback to a commentary. A commentary is basically an interpretive and highly informed paraphrase of the sacred text, and as such readers may find themselves becoming wearied by the predictable pattern of text/commentary that prevails throughout, especially toward the end of the book. Although the study is academically sound, the reader should not expect to find some novel conceptual framework to analyze old questions or exhaustive and in-depth research into the questions raised. Yet, as a work that combines some basic research and creative insight concerning substantive issues in the relationship between the two world faiths, the book is well worth reading.

One section of this Tablet merits special mention. This is the last paragraph of Bahá'u'lláh's letter, which could aptly be called "the Bahá'í Beatitudes" since each one of the twenty-three verses in this last section begins with the word "Blessed" or "Blessed is." Its repetitive style is reminiscent of the beautiful passage in *Gleanings* that begins "Be generous in prosperity and thankful in adversity" (285), where each one of the verses begins with the exhortation "Be." Michael Sours's interpretation of this whole section of Bahá'í scripture is a fine piece of work. He offers many insights based on his research and his own thinking by way of comparison between the Beatitudes of Jesus found in Matthew (5:1-12) and those of Bahá'u'lláh. He suggests three reasons for Bahá'u'lláh's intentional patterning of the last section of his letter with the Beatitudes of Christ: Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that in essence his message is one with that of Christ; it signals the establishment of a new covenant; the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's message is also the Kingdom of God. All of these reasons are elaborated in a satisfactory manner.

There is, in closing, one noticeable lack. Nowhere in the first pages of the text or on the dust jacket is there any biographical information about the author. Such information would have been appreciated by the reader.