

THE SADDLEBAG: A FABLE FOR DOUBTERS AND SEEKERS**Author:** Bahiyyih Nakhjavani**Published by:** Beacon Press, 2000, 253 pages.

In his fourteenth-century poem, *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer had used the structural device of the pilgrimage to bring together characters from the three medieval classes, the aristocracy, the clergy, and the peasants. In *The Saddlebag*, Bahiyyih Nakhjavani recasts in a nineteenth-century Moslem context the device of the pilgrimage as a means for drawing together a diverse set of characters. Nakhjavani presents the stories of nine characters, from different religious, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds, who are all thrown together through their involvement with a pilgrim caravan traveling from Mecca to Medina in early 1840s Arabia. These characters are all affected in various ways when one of them, a thief, steals a saddlebag from a young merchant pilgrim traveling the pilgrim route on his own. The saddlebag, which the thief assumes will contain jewels and valuables, turns out to be filled with scrolls written in the finest calligraphy containing prayers and scriptures. The story of the theft of the saddlebag is based on an incident in *The Dawn-Breakers*, a historical account of the early years of the Bahá'í Faith just before and after the time in 1844 when a young Persian merchant called the Báb (or Gate) declared that He was the Promised One from God, the most recent of God's manifestations or messengers, sent to bring about a new spiritual Revelation and to prepare people for the coming of One greater than Himself.

While Chaucer's poem presents characters who represent the widely different secular and spiritual possibilities of his day and suggests, among other things, the tensions in late medieval society which were soon to lead to its decay and the eventual rise of the Renaissance, Nakhjavani's novel captures the tensions in the early nineteenth-century Middle East just at the time of the birth of a new spiritual Revelation—the Bahá'í Faith. Again a widely diverse set of characters are presented, but Nakhjavani widens the scope of her parable to suggest not only the tensions of the time but also the various religious and spiritual orientations that make up humankind's history. Hence her book presents a microcosm of humanity's spiritual evolution as well as the process of individual spiritual growth.

Each of Nakhjavani's nine characters—a young Bedouin thief; an Arabian chieftain; a Shiite Moslem priest; an Indian Hindu moneychanger; a Chinese Moslem pilgrim who studied Buddhism for some years in a monastery in Tibet; a young Zoroastrian bride from southeast Persia; her black, Jewish Falashan servant; a nominally Protestant British spy disguised as a dervish; and the corpse of an old Persian Shiite Moslem merchant—is affected by their interaction with the scrolls in ways that relate to their stage of individual psychological and spiritual development, and their cultural and religious

affiliation. Thus the young Bedouin thief who steals the saddlebag, while functioning at an early tribal level of magical thinking, is highly attuned to the natural world around him and thus is a kind of animist or nature mystic. His interaction with the scrolls leads to his acknowledgement of another kind of spiritual power; he recognizes that the young merchant who carries the scrolls can control the voices of nature that the thief is attuned to. Thus the thief recognizes this new messenger and dies having been granted forgiveness and grace.

The tribal chieftain for the gang of bandits for whom the thief serves as a guide is obsessed with hierarchy and control. He has been influenced by the teachings of the Wahhábí Moslem sect which stresses Muḥammad's human qualities. To the chieftain, Muḥammad's strength lies in his ability to control men and get them to do His bidding. The chieftain is a dominator, who keeps his position as leader of his bandits through his bravery, daring, and brutality. His contact with the scrolls comes after he attacks the pilgrim caravan and murders a young bride dressed in her wedding finery. Through the bride's incomprehensible behavior—she welcomes him with love—the chieftain becomes aware that he has acted out a part in a spiritual drama that he does not understand or control. This realization undermines his belief in his own dominance and eventually drives him to leave his life of banditry and domination. Unable to forget the enigmatic Zoroastrian bride, he moves to eastern Persia where he takes up a life of growing figs and apricots, sugaring them, and selling them to the nearby Zoroastrian community.

The young Zoroastrian bride, given to visions and dreams, is able to progress beyond her adolescent whims and realize her heart's desire, becoming the first of her religion to recognize the new Savior. Her Jewish slave, after a harsh life of abuse and deprivation, is enabled to heal painful spiritual and psychological wounds—to forgive herself for her idolatry of her mistress and find God "standing within" her.¹ The Indian moneychanger overcomes a lifetime of debasement and insincerity, finding at last the courage and strength to acquire an authentic self; while the British spy furthers his career and progresses socially—all that he truly desires. One character, the Priest, is left caught in ambivalence, unable to decide whether to devote his life to furthering the new spiritual teachings that his heart is drawn to or to continue his life's path as a Shiite priest and persecute the new movement.

The last character in the book, the corpse, when alive had been a wealthy Persian businessman. He had had financial dealings with the young merchant, the writer of the scrolls, and had tried to cheat him. After death, in his painful state of transition between one level of being and another, he must slowly come to terms with his lack of preparedness for death and his regret for his untrustworthiness toward the young merchant. His painful efforts to overcome the awful smell from his own decaying physical remains—a symbol of his lack

of detachment from his own ego—and to think in terms of “we” not “I”—suggesting his need to develop his sense of connectedness to others—suggest some of the spiritual efforts we all need to make to prepare ourselves for what Nakhjavani calls the “dance” of immortality.

Like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Nakhjavani’s book is a parable suggesting we are all on a pilgrimage attempting to discover the meaning of our experiences, to recognize the spiritual opportunities provided to us, and to prepare ourselves for the transition to another level of existence. The novel’s particular setting and events focus this timeless quest on the moment in time when a new surge of spiritual power is being experienced, when the Báb’s Revelation is about to unfold. As such, it has particular relevance to a Bahá’í reader.

The book’s presentation of nine different characters representing nine different religious orientations all being affected in their own ways by the scrolls and the life of the young Persian merchant vividly illustrate the power of the Bahá’í teachings to speak to different kinds of people and to fulfill the promises of earlier prophets. One of the nine characters, an old Chinese pilgrim who has spent a lifetime engaged in spiritual search, provides a thematic focus for all the characters. Struggling to understand one of the scrolls which speaks about “the primal point,” he slowly realizes that where he is, sinking in quicksand in the middle of a sandstorm near a newly dug well, is “his ‘Way,’ the primal point of his circle.” There are many paths, he realizes: “the names are different but the source is the primal point!” (173). Now understanding that the source of the primal point, of spiritual power, is the water from the well (the new Revelation), he can accept his imminent death and trust in his immortality. Nakhjavani’s book is able to reveal each character’s center, his or her primal point, and at the same time their connection to the larger scheme of things. She evokes with sensitivity and skill both the microcosm of the individual’s struggle and suffering and the macrocosm of spiritual evolution and revelation. Thus she reflects the power of the Bahá’í Revelation in many different kinds of mirrors and allows us to see its ability to speak to people at every step on the journey through life.

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Note

1. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1994) Arabic no. 13.