

From the Editor's Desk

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THE ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL:
CELEBRATING THE BICENTENARY
OF THE BIRTH OF THE BÁB

To commemorate the Bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, our cover is graced by the photo “Terraces of Light, Light upon Light.” The title refers to the dark nights the Báb spent imprisoned in the mountain fortress of Mahku, where He was not allowed even a candle.

The nineteen terraces, which ascend the holy mountain and embrace the Shrine of the Báb, were first envisioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, then instigated by Shoghi Effendi, and finally designed and completed by renowned architect Fariborz Sahba, in consultation with the Universal House of Justice. Naturally, the focal point of the terraces is the Shrine of the Báb, the “Queen of Carmel,” which contains the sacred remains of the “Primal Point” and His young companion Anís, who were martyred together in 1850, in Tabriz. The spot for this edifice was chosen by Bahá’u’lláh Himself, during a trip to Mount Carmel with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It wasn’t until the 21st of March 1909, however, that the Báb’s remains were finally laid to rest within the simple structure erected by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself.

That evening, He placed the Báb’s remains in a marble sarcophagus in the middle room. According to Shoghi Effendi,

When all was finished, and the earthly remains of the Martyr-Prophet of Shíráz were, at long last, safely deposited for their everlasting rest in the bosom of God’s holy mountain, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who had cast aside His turban, removed His shoes and thrown off His cloak, bent low over the still open sarcophagus, His silver hair waving about His head and His face transfigured and luminous, rested His forehead on the border of the wooden casket, and, sobbing aloud, wept with such a weeping that all those who were present wept with Him. That night He could not sleep, so overwhelmed was He with emotion. (*God Passes By* 276)

The room where the Bab’s casket lies is in the second row of six rooms within the modest building, constructed of stone from a nearby site. “Every stone of that building, every stone of the road leading to it . . . I have with infinite tears and at tremendous cost, raised and placed in position” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in *God Passes By* 276). In 1929, three more rooms were built behind the second row, thereby placing the remains of the Báb and Anís at the precise center of the nine-room structure.

In 1921, the remains of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá were interred in the middle room, next to the Báb’s resting place, until such

time as an appropriate shrine could be built for Him alone. As announced this year (176 BE) in the Ridván letter from the Universal House of Justice, the site for the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has already been selected, the architect chosen, and pictures of the model are available for all to see.

The idea of nine terraces leading up to the Shrine of the Báb and the nine ascending from it to the top of Mount Carmel was instigated by Shoghi Effendi, who also guided architect Sutherland Maxwell in constructing a beautiful domed superstructure to house the original stone shrine.

The whole story and evolution of the Shrine of the Báb and its terraces has yet to be told in full. Mysteries of significance and meaning could lead us to wonder, for example, why the Shrine of the Báb is the focal point of the Bahá'í gardens on Mt. Carmel, while the Qiblih (Point of Adoration) of the Bahá'í Faith is the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh—which is currently a simple garden house outside the city of ‘Akká. One answer is that this is what Bahá'u'lláh Himself desired and designated. Another answer lies in the Báb's own declaration that He was the long-awaited Qá'im of Islam, as well as the herald of a worldwide Resurrection prophesied in all the Abrahamic religions. His station is that of the “Primal Point,” the beginning of a new era—the Bahá'í Era—as well as a new Cycle in human history destined to last no less than five hundred thousand years. In addition, the Báb's Writings, many of which explain the

more abstruse and important Súrihs of the Qur'án, summarize all previous divine Revelation during the Prophetic (or Adamic) Cycle. The Báb is thus the point of confluence between these two important periods in the advancement of civilization and humanity's spiritual evolution.

While symbolism is plentiful relating to the Báb, the Shrine of the Báb, and the terraces that ascend Mount Carmel, for the purposes of this introduction, let us examine three deeper meanings that are especially apt in this Bicentenary year. The first of these—and relatively unknown to most contemporaries—is the symbolic allusion to climbing this holy mountain as a mystical act of ascending to God. This idea was popularized in a work by St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century.¹

St. John of the Cross was a Spanish Catholic mystic and poet. He composed a poetic treatise titled *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which portrays how the individual can—through intense prayer, reflection, and adherence to the ascetic life—attain the presence of, or union with, the Beloved (Christ, in the context of St. John's masterpiece).

O night that guided me
O night more lovely than the dawn
O night that joined

1 The sacred importance of Mount Carmel can be traced back to the fifteen century BCE, and it plays a part in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith.

The Beloved with the lover
 Lover transformed in the Beloved

Upon my flowery breast
 Which I kept whole for himself
 alone
 There he stayed sleeping
 and I caressed him,
 And the fanning of the cedars
 made a breeze

The breeze from the turret
 While I was parting his locks
 With his gentle hand
 He was wounding my neck
 And causing all my senses to be
 suspended

I remained myself and forgot
 myself
 My face I reclined on the lover,
 All ceased and I abandoned
 myself
 Leaving my cares
 forgotten among the lilies.²

Because this magnificent opus is similar to Persian and Arabic mystic poetry written around the same period, one could imagine some Islamic or Moorish influence here, especially since St. John lived in those parts of Spain that had been governed by the Caliphate of Cordoba. But the main reason for his symbolic use of the ascent of Mount Carmel was his membership in the Carmelite Order, a monastic order that be traced back to a community of

hermits who lived on Mount Carmel in the thirteenth century.

The similarity in tone and imagery of St. John's verses to the "Ode of the Dove"—a poem Bahá'u'lláh composed while He was dwelling in the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih (and which is translated and included in this issue)—might seem remarkable. However, there seems to be a common theme and spiritual process within mystic poetry, no matter to what religion, gender, or culture its authors belong. This can be seen in the poems of Rumi regarding "the Friend," in the poems of Táhiriḥ regarding the Báb, and in the verses of Bahá'u'lláh regarding the Ḥúríyyih (the Maid of Heaven).

St. John's verses are also reminiscent of many of Bahá'u'lláh's statements that comprehension of the mystic or hidden significances of scripture is ultimately a matter of "purity of heart" rather than intellect alone: "The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* ¶ 233).

A second important meaning of Mount Carmel relates to Shoghi Effendi's description of the nature of this holy site as the symbolic center of the earth. In a letter written 29 March 1951, Shoghi Effendi states that "just as in the realm of the spirit, the reality of the Báb has been hailed by the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation as 'The Point round Whom the realities of the

² Trans, P. Silverio de Santa Teresa and ed. E. Allison Peers, 10.

Prophets and Messengers revolve,' so, on this visible plane, His sacred remains constitute the heart and center of what may be regarded as nine concentric circles, paralleling thereby, and adding further emphasis to the central position accorded by the Founder of our Faith to One 'from Whom God hath caused to proceed the knowledge of all that was and shall be,' 'the Primal Point from which have been generated all created things'" (*Citadel of Faith* 97).

Of greater interest still is the detail with which Shoghi Effendi describes what each of these nine concentric circles represents. The ninth or "outermost circle" represents "the entire planet"; the eighth is the "Holy Land," what 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to as "the Nest of the Prophets"; the seventh encircles Mount Carmel, "the Vineyard of the Lord"; the sixth contains "the extensive properties permanently dedicated to and constituting the sacred precincts of the Báb's holy Sepulcher"; within these properties is the fifth circle, containing "the most holy court, an enclosure comprising gardens and terraces"; the fourth is "the mausoleum of the Báb"; and within "the shell designed to preserve and adorn" it is the fourth circle, the "chambers which constitute the tomb itself, and which were constructed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá"; the third circle is "the vault wherein reposes the most holy casket"; the second designates "the alabaster sarcophagus" within that vault; and, finally, within that sarcophagus lies "that inestimable jewel, the Báb's holy dust" (*Citadel of Faith* 95). His detailed overview

of the spiritual influence emanating from this sacred spot concludes with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's observation that "the tomb itself housing this dust" is the "spot round which the Concourse on high circle in adoration" (95).

A third meaning of this sacred spot is conveyed by the terraces that emanate from the Shrine of the Báb, as conceived of by architect Fariborz Sahba. In one sense, Sahba's plan encompasses both aspects of the symbolism just described. The terraces rise majestically from the base of the mountain to the summit, drawing pilgrims' hearts and minds toward God. Like the steps in the mystic ascent portrayed in the treatise of St. John of the Cross, or the successive stages of spiritual growth in Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys*, each terrace is unique, a special experience for the wayfarer. Some offer a retreat, a place of rest and reflection amid the flowers and fountains. Yet the steps beckon us onward, urging us to continue this journey of heart and spirit, drawing ever nearer to the Queen of Carmel. Once we have attained that sacred point, we are not finished with our journey, but must climb ever higher, approaching the summit from which we can gaze across the Bay of Haifa towards the Qiblih, the threshold of "Him Whom God would make Manifest," the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh at Bahjí.

The water that flows alongside the stairs circulates like blood in the body. The descending water refreshes the gardens at each terrace, and, having reached the bottom, returns to the top

reinvigorated, so that it may once again descend and make the entire design a living, life-giving creation.

Perhaps the most clear and compelling meaning is offered by the shape of the terraces seen from a distance. The eighteen terraces represent the eighteen Letters of the Living, the first disciples of the Báb. Sabha has shown their spiritual relationship visually. The lower terraces curve up, while the top terraces curve down, forming concentric circles that ripple outward from the Shrine of the Báb. Similar to the concentric circles described by Shoghi Effendi, the terraces appear to be generated by the Shrine of the Báb, with the Shrine itself, and the gardens surrounding it, forming the nineteenth terrace and the focal point—or “Primal Point”—of the entire design.

With these meanings in mind, this issue contains three articles that delve into the symbolism contained in three of Bahá'u'lláh's works. The first article, “Bahá'u'lláh's Symbolic Use of the Veiled Húriyyih” analyzes some of the meanings behind the appearance of the Veiled Maiden, as alluded to by Bahá'u'lláh in His letters, and as portrayed in detail in such works as the *Súriy-i-Haykal*. Following this, and in keeping with the theme of mysticism at the heart of all divine Revelation, we have published a provisional translation of Bahá'u'lláh's famous poem “Ode of the Dove.” Here, Bahá'u'lláh presents a lengthy dialogue between Himself (as persona/narrator) and the Húriyyih—the Maid of Heaven (a personification of “the Most Great Spirit”).

The second essay is a discussion of the well-known Lawh-i-Tibb, Bahá'u'lláh's tablet to a physician. While there is not yet any authorized translation of the work, the maxims it contains regarding health are often cited. This discussion by Dr. Misagh Ziaei reviews the tablet's historical context, as well as some of its guidance regarding the study and practice of medicine, including the attributes its practitioners must acquire and maintain.

The final article is Tom Lysaght's creative comparison of the biblical figure of Joseph and the character of Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Lysaght, a student of drama, does a fascinating and useful job in uncovering how these two at-first disparate figures must endure similar challenges in order to become their true selves and serve society. In addition, because Joseph is central to works such as the *Qayyumu'l-Asma*, this comparison encourages us to examine his story and allusions more thoroughly, in light of the Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's Writings.

Indeed, we are calling for more creative studies of the sacred Bahá'í texts, including the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as well as the Guardian's letters, histories, and commentaries. For while individuals cannot produce authoritative translations or interpretations of the Bahá'í Writings, all are encouraged to dive into the vast ocean of this Revelation—and to share the beautiful pearls of wisdom they find in those depths.

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE TO READ. . .

As a service to our readers, we are including the hyperlinks to articles related to the subjects presented in this issue. These are articles that have been previously published in the *Journal* and are available for free on our website.

First is a piece by Paula A. Drewek titled “Feminine Forms of the Divine in Bahá'í Scriptures.” The article responds to feminist research in religious studies, but from a Bahá'í perspective and answers the resurgence of interest in a feminine divine in several religions by offering examples of the interaction between male and female principles in Bahá'í sacred writings.

<https://bahai-studies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/5.1.Drewek.pdf>

The article “Metaphor and the Language of Revelation” by Ross Woodman asserts that metaphor is the literal language of the soul. He explains that to enter the realm of metaphor as the language of the soul is to come into direct contact with the Word as the originating power of creation, and in his discussion he explores the metaphorical language as the language of Revelation and the richer unveiling of its meaning that can be found in the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

<https://bahai-studies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/8.1-1Woodman.pdf>

The article “Concealment and Revelation in Bahá'u'lláh's ‘Book of the River’” by noted Bahá'í scholar Nader Saiedi examines and counters a thesis previously proposed by Juan Cole that Bahá'u'lláh did not consider himself a Manifestation of God until a short time prior to His Ridván declaration and that Bahá'u'lláh experience in the Siyáh-Chál was not really a divine revelation. Saiedi refutes this thesis by examining the text of the “Book of the River” in terms of “the dialectic of concealment and revelation that characterizes Bahá'u'lláh's early writings.”

<https://bahai-studies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/9.3-Saiedi.pdf>

Finally, there is an article by our editor John S Hatcher, “Unveiling the Húrí of Love,” which attempts to explain a parallel relationship between (1) the means by which the essentially unknowable intelligence we call “God” employs the intermediaries of extraordinary beings (Manifestations) to run physical reality, and (2) the means by which the essentially unknowable intelligence we call the human “soul” employs the intermediary of an extraordinary creation (the human brain) to run our physical bodies. The abiding theme of this discourse is the attempt to understand how the Creator's love is the motive force instigating and sustaining these parallel systems.

<https://bahai-studies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/15.1-4.Hatcher.pdf>