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About

Originally published in 1900, in Cairo, *Miracles and Metaphors* is now available in English translation. Mirzá Abu'l-Fadl in this collection of essays and short commentaries writes on the most significant religious and metaphysical topics with an originality that is both startling and refreshing. His rational approach to religion renders the book modern and challenging.

Here are collected Bahá'í answers to old religious controversies: Are the Scriptures to be taken literally? Do miracles occur? What is an angel? Are the stories of the Old Testament to be believed? When first published, the answers to these questions provoked heated controversy among Egyptian intellectuals. Some, such as Mustafá Kamil and Shaykh 'Alí Yúsuf, greeted them with enthusiasm. Others thundered their condemnations.

The book is as relevant today as it was then, and is required reading for any serious student of the Bahá'í Faith. [Kalimat, 1981]

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Translator's Dedication

To Badi'u'llah Farid, Hashim Farnush, Kamalu'd-Din Bakhtavar, and all the other intellectual and spiritual heirs of Abu'l-Fadl in our day who so loved their blessed Faith that they rushed to the field of martyrdom for its sake.

Their sublime thoughts once enlightened us for a moment; their lofty example now illumines us for all eternity.

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Introduction

"Before attending to the gift of faith, human beings are like the dead; and after attainment of faith, all achieve nothingness at the sacred threshold of the Divine." With these words Mirza Abu'l-Fadl used to turn aside every query about his life story. Speaking at a gathering of the friends on the day news of Abu'l-Fadl's death reached Haifa, `Abdu'l-Bahá said of him "In all this time I never heard him use the word "I" — `I said this' or `I wrote that.'"

This scholar of towering intellect and prodigious erudition, who by any standard may well be considered the most learned man of the first century of the Bahá'í Era, was also a model of humility, detachment, service to the Cause, and servitude to his fellow-believers. So highly prized were these qualities by `Abdu'l-Bahá, and so great was His love for Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, that once while in the United States, hearing of Abu'l-Fadl's illness in Egypt, He sent the following cable to the friends in Cairo: "See to the comfort of Abu'l-Fada'il. He consists of my own self."

Abu'l-Fadl was born in the town of Gulpaygan, in central Iran, in 1844, the very year of the declaration of the Bab. He came from a family of religious scholars, and he pursued the same path. He quickly distinguished himself at the local seminary and proceeded to an institution of higher religious learning in Isfahan. So brilliant was his record and reputation that before

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he was thirty he was installed as the master teacher of a prestigious seminary in Tihiran. In Isfahan he had come into contact with Bahá'ís; and in Tihiran he was pursued by some tenacious Bahá'í teachers whom he debated, ridiculed and rejected for nearly three years. The veils of intellectual pride and traditional learning which kept the light from reaching his heart were parted by a Bahá'í of humble rank and no schooling.

The story is charming and profoundly revealing, for it contains the key to Abu'l-Fadl's turn of mind and to the thrust of his lifelong scholarly labors on behalf of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, of which the present volume is a representative example. One day as he waited at a roadside blacksmith shop for his donkey to be shod, the blacksmith said to him, "Mulla, I have heard of some holy traditions of the blessed imams which I have difficulty understanding. Can you help me?"

Abu'l-Fadl assented.

The blacksmith said, "I have heard the mullas quoting a holy tradition on the subject of God's mercy in sending down the rains: that every drop of rain is entrusted to an angel of God who brings it down to earth. Is this tradition true?"

Abu'l-Fadl answered, "Yes."

"Again I have heard," the blacksmith went on, "on the subject of the ritual uncleanliness of dogs: there is a holy tradition that angels do not descend to houses where dogs are kept. Is this true?"

Again Abu'l-Fadl answered affirmatively.

"Then," the blacksmith said, "we should see no rain fall onto houses which have dogs. How is it that the rains, when they come, come down everywhere?"

Abu'l-Fadl was greatly perturbed by the man's conundrum, but his companions told him, "Never

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mind that troublemaker. He is just a misguided Babi." For Abu'l-Fadl, however, as he was to retell later in life, the dilemma epitomized the incongruence of sedulous, uncritical and literal acceptance of religious scriptures to enlightened faith and the gift of reason. The elaborate edifice of dogmatic knowledge which was his legacy and his pride could not stand the test of the common sense of an ordinary man. He then began a new course of serious and fair-minded study of the Writings of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh. Before him were opening not just new visions of spiritual reality, but also new ways of looking at truth, and the pursuit of truth. In the end, it was the force of the *Kitab-i Iqan* that confirmed him. That book was to remain a beacon throughout his life. Much of what he later wrote and said as a Bahá'í rests on the premises of the *Iqan*: that is, the striving for a spiritually valid and reaffirming understanding of the Scriptures which is also compatible with the human intellect. The year was 1876.

The next ten years were spent in traveling and teaching throughout Iran at the behest of Bahá'u'lláh. He was imprisoned several times for his faith, and on some occasions he was in danger of being put to death. His own family turned against him and deprived him of his rightful patrimony. It was through Varqa, the poet, martyr-to-be, that he received encouragement from Bahá'u'lláh to devote his pen as well as his tongue to the furtherance of the Faith and to utilize his scholarship for its defense. In 1886, he left Persian for `Ishqabad, Russia, at Bahá'u'lláh's request. Within two months of his arrival in that city he was to witness the momentous events surrounding the martyrdom of one of the Bahá'ís (Haji Muhammad Rida Isfahani), and serve as the chief Bahá'í spokesman at

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the historic trial of the murders, which resulted in recognition of the independent character of the Bahá'í community in Russian Turkistan.

From `Ishqabad Abu'l-Fadl went to Samarqand and Bukhara. These cities had been at the zenith of Islamic civilization in Central Asia, vibrant centers of intellectual activity, eight centuries earlier. The decay in which he found them, combined with his lack of apparent success at direct teaching in those

parts, coinciding with the news of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, left him in a mood of relative quiet and inactivity.

Out of this torpor, he was called by `Abdu'l-Bahá to the Holy Land in 1894. His spirit was galvanized. He was launched on the most productive and significant labors of his life. The twenty years that were left to him until his death in 1914 were filled with teaching, traveling and writing — always at the direction of his beloved Master. His first assignment was to proceed to Egypt.

At the turn of the century, Egypt was the hub of what was left of a once dynamic Muslim civilization. Centuries-long traditions of religious scholarship, represented by the venerable institution of al-Azhar, the school of higher Islamic learning, were being animated by the winds of "reform" and "modernism." `Abdu'l-Bahá wanted to inject the relevance of the Bahá'í Faith into that atmosphere, and Mirza Abu'l-Fadl was His chosen instrument. He wisely advised him to adopt an indirect approach. For had Abu'l-Fadl attempted to talk openly about the Faith from the outset, he would never have received a respectful hearing in the intellectual circles of Cairo. In the eyes of conservative Sunni scholars, a Persian

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"apostate" from Shi'i Islam would have had a double mark against him. Instead, he gained his entry into those circles by the judicious demonstration of his remarkable intellect and his brilliant grasp of comparative religious history and thought. He was particularly noted for his original turn of mind in interpretation of religious scriptures. Soon he had a large and avid circle of al-Azhar students and other devotees who were gradually introduced to the Faith. A significantly large number of them ultimately became Bahá'ís.

In Cairo, Mirza Abu'l-Fadl became a magnet of Bahá'í intellectual activity. From Persia and India, Turkistan and Caucasus, Syria and the Holy Land, even from Burma and China Bahá'ís corresponded with him — many of them referred to him by `Abdu'l-Bahá — raising questions of scriptural interpretation. Objections to and attacks on the Faith were sent to him for response and defense.

With the publication of some of his writings in Egypt, the phase of indirect teaching and guarded identity came to an end. In 1898, Fara'id, his eloquent response to an attack on the Faith by a certain Muslim cleric from the Caucasus, was published in Cairo. Since it was written in Persian, it did not attract much attention or opposition in Arab-speaking Egypt. In 1900, Shaykh Faraj'ullah Zaki al-Kurdi, one of the devoted group of Abu'l-Fadl's al-Azhar disciples who had become a Bahá'í, published the original of the present collection of essays in Arabic under the title ad-Durar al-Bahiyyah (The brilliant pearls).

Mirza Abu'l-Fadl now emerged in Egypt as the learned exponent of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. His erudition in Islamic sciences and his brilliant defense of

Islam against tendentious missionaries and orientalist elicited the admiration of open-minded people,

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and his unconcealed identity as a Bahá'í aroused the vilification and abuse of dogmatic religious fundamentalists.

From this vortex of activity and public attention `Abdu'l-Bahá lifted Mirza Abu'l-Fadl into yet another arena of crucial service to the Cause. The nascent community of Bahá'ís in America was in dire need of an authoritative and coherent understanding of the fundamentals of its Faith. Above all, it needed a devoted and persuasive expounder of the theme of the Covenant if it was to achieve the essential unity that was prerequisite for its growth. In December of 1900, `Abdul-Baha sent Laura Clifford Barney to Egypt to accompany Abu'l-Fadl to the West. After a three month stay with the Bahá'ís in Paris, he sailed for America. `Abdu'l-Bahá sent a young man, Ali-Kuli Khan, to translate for him because Mirza Abu'l-Fadl knew no English. He remained in America just a few months short of four years. He held regular classes for the Bahá'ís and for seekers in Washington, New York, Chicago, and Boston.

His classes at Green Acre left an indelible mark on the young and eager community. It was here, in an atmosphere fostered by Sarah Farmer, that the ghost of Emerson blended with talk of Nirvana and Spiritualism. Here, where professors of philosophy from Harvard and Columbia mingled with artists and men and women of affluence and influence, the figure of this disciplined and almost ascetic man towered above all. The wealth of his knowledge, the rigor of his intellect, the range of his awareness of the currents of philosophic and scientific thought in the West, and the originality of his approach to traditional subjects were

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sources of amazement and enlightenment to all whose paths he crossed.

It may be said without exaggeration that it was Mirza Abu'l-Fadl who prepared the ground for the visit of his beloved Master to America. While in this country he wrote *The Bahá'í Proofs* which was published in Ali-Kuli Khan's English translation. This was his contribution to the teaching of the Cause in predominantly Christian society.

The vital and tender bonds of love and devotion that were forged between this scholar of the East and the young community of American Bahá'ís whom he had helped deepen in the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh were touchingly evident on the day they gathered to bid him farewell on 29 November 1904. In a rare reference

to his own life he said: "My tongue falters at offering adequate thanks to God for having granted me such loving brothers and sisters. I am reminded of a passage in the Gospels [Mark 10:29-30]: `And Jesus answered and said, "Verily I say unto you, there is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but that he shall receive a hundredfold now in this time ..."

Praised be God that in this glorious age all the verses of the Holy Books have come to pass.

"Thirty-two years ago when I was leaving my hometown, I was still a Muslim, and my mother, sister and brothers gathered to say good-bye to me. Three years later when I entered this Mighty Cause in Tihnan, all my relatives abandoned me and left me friendless, helpless and alone in the world. Now consider the bounty and generosity of our Master who has fulfilled His promise and granted my hundreds of

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times over what was lost in His path.... How can I ever adequately thank the Divine Bounties for having bestowed upon me such spiritual kin as you?"

The last ten years of Mirza Abu'l-Fadl's life were spent in Cairo, with occasional sojourns in Beirut and visits to Haifa. During the time that `Abdu'l-Bahá was in Alexandria, in 1910, He rented a house nearby for Abu'l-Fadl so that he could be near Him. Grown frail and in ill health, this solitary man was busy with his research and writing to the end of his days. Numerous treatises on the history of the Bahá'í Faith, the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, the proofs and prophecies of the Qur'an and of the Bible, belong to these last years.

He died January 21, 1914, in Cairo. He was designated a Hand of the Cause; and his remains are buried now in the Cairo Bahá'í cemetery next to another Hand of the Cause, Lua Gettsinger, with whom he shares a joint monument. He was named Muhammad, and Abu'l-Fadl, Father of Excellence, was his given appellation. But `Abdu'l-Bahá always addressed him as Abu'l-Fada'il (the plural form), Father of All Excellences.

The present collection of essays published together first in 1900, is fairly representative of Abu'l-Fadl's pattern of scholarship. The impetus is provided by questions put to him by Bahá'ís and others, often dealing with difficulties arising from literal interpretation of Holy Scriptures. Refutation of attacks upon the integrity of the Bahá'í Revelation, defense of the rightful place of Islam in the progressive history of religions, issues of proof and verification in comparative religious history, constitute the major themes of these essays. Among the questioners are such Muslim learned men as Shaykh Nuru'd-Din of

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Sind, who apparently corresponded with Mirza Abu'l-Fadl from Karachi, and who went on to become the second titular head of the Ahmadiyya movement in India;

and Husayn Effendi Ruhi, a longtime Bahá'í companion of Abu'l-Fadl.

What is remarkable about the nature of Abu'l-Fadl's responses is that they are firmly based upon meticulous and prodigious historical inquiry and encyclopedic knowledge of sources, aided by full and free use of deductive reasoning. In other words, he combines the best — and vast — advantages of his traditional knowledge with an open, critical and questioning mind. He characterizes the intellectual bankruptcy of the traditional curricula of the Islamic schools as the "mouldering repetitions of the elders."

Above all, it is the aim of his scholarship that informs and infuses the quality and the methodology of his works. That aim is, at all times, the affirmation of the Cause of God and the furtherance of its teachings. In pursuit of that aim Abu'l-Fadl acquired a rare balance of devotion, humility and love of learning. He was convinced that with the aid of prayer most problems of religious, and even scientific, enquiry may be solved or understood. As he points out in one of the essays of this volume, knowledge is nothing but comprehension of the reality of things, and the reality of things can only be reflected in hearts which are pure. That purity is attainable through prayer and spiritual concentration.

There is value for the modern reader in these essays, not only in the historical interest of the subject matters, but in Abu'l-Fadl's aims and methods of dealing with them. The seriousness of religious scholarship and the integrity of scriptural knowledge may not be as prevalent as they were in Abu'l-Fadl's time, but a

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far more debased and intellectually repugnant version of these, in the form of a simplistic and simple-minded fundamentalism, is resurgent everywhere in our time. Abu'l-Fadl's gifts of enlightened faith, profound knowledge and judicious reasoning are examples to the rising generation of Bahá'í scholars who must cope with it.

Juan Cole's excellent translation and annotation of these essays is cause for hope that the "extended family" of the spiritual kin of Mirza Abu'l-Fada'il, the Father of All Excellences, is growing.

Amin Banani

Santa Monica

February 1982

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MIRACLES AND METAPHORS

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INVOCATION

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

I render praise and thanksgiving to our Lord, the Exalted, the Most High. I prostrate myself before His Countenance, the Most Holy, the Glorious, the Most Glorious. I ask blessings and peace for the Dawning-Places of His light, the Fountainheads of His Manifestation among His creatures — especially the noble Branch that has come forth from the Ancient Root, the true Mystery that has emanated from the will of his Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate. May God cause us to be among those that seek the protection of his banner, and count us among his chosen and beloved ones.

The Lord has restored the glory of the ancients, and Raised up for splendor an imperishable palace. It still stands at the towering heights: that which once Enraptured the breeze in the knolls of the gardens.

I, Abu'l-Fadl Muhammad Gulpaygani of Iran, the son of Muhammad-Rida, testify that the eminent and erudite Indian scholar Nuru'd-Din (may God illumine both of us with the light of certitude) asked me some scholarly religious questions. Some of these were related to matters of ancient history. Anyone with awareness will see that this is difficult terrain to cover and that these matters are shrouded in mystery. For

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this era is of great antiquity: all traces of it have been destroyed, and its light has faded. We, therefore, have chosen to respond to him according to our limited knowledge and understanding, keeping the discussion concise.

We confess the fewness of our wares and our lack of any qualification to compete in this arena. We beseech God at the very beginning of this discussion to safeguard us by His grace from errors in our views and our discourse. He, verily, is our Guardian in the beginning and in the end.

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chapter 1

METADATA

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