

Baha'i Reflections on the Seal of the Prophets

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Unsealing the “Seal of the Prophets”

Christopher Buck • Oct 1, 2013 • 7 Comments

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TEACHINGS

BAHA'I QUOTES THAT CHANGED MY

PART 7 IN SERIES: LIFE

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Even as the Lord of being hath in His unerring Book [the Qur'an], after speaking of the "Seal" in His exalted utterance: "Muhammad is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets," hath revealed unto all people the promise of "attainment unto the divine Presence." ...

Nothing more exalted or more explicit than “attainment unto the divine Presence” hath been revealed in the Qur’an. ...

And yet, through the mystery of the former verse, they have turned away from the grace promised by the latter, despite the fact that “attainment unto the divine Presence” in the “Day of Resurrection” is explicitly stated in the Book.

Baha'u'llah, *The Book of Certitude*, Paragraphs 181–182.

This quote changed my life, challenged my thinking, gave me insight. Here's how:

Calgary, 1991. Bone-chilling winter. Freezing cold outside. Not so cold inside. Colder in the basement, though. Way past midnight. Wife, two young sons, fast asleep. Freeze-dried coffee. Stay awake. Keep typing. Finish my Master's thesis.

Read above passage again. Again and again. Something puzzles me. Got to figure this out: What's the "latter" verse that

Baha'u'llah refers to? Must be important: "Nothing more exalted ... hath been revealed in the Qur'an."

Okay. "Seal of the Prophets" is verse 33:40 in the Qur'an. (The world's 1.6 billion Muslims revere Q. 33:40.) Definitely the "former verse" Baha'u'llah refers to.

But where's the "latter" verse? No citation. No footnote. First clue: "Latter" means "later." After the "Seal of the Prophets" verse, what should I look for? (Baha'u'llah's next clue: "Day of Resurrection.")

How many times have I read this text? Lost count. Must study the text again. Drink more Taster's Choice. Get up. Walk around. Stretch. Sit down. Read again. Concentrate! Q. 33:40. Verses right after. Here's what they say:

Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but the Messenger of God, and the Seal of the Prophets; God has knowledge of everything.

O believers, remember God oft, and give Him glory at the dawn and in the evening. It is He who blesses you, and His angels, to bring you forth from the shadows into the light. He is All-compassionate to the believers.

Their greeting, on the day when they shall meet Him, will be 'Peace!'

Qur'an 33:40–44. [Arberry's translation.]

I think I got it! Sudden insight? Did I just discover the "latter" verse that Baha'u'llah refers to? Maybe. The verse qualifies.

For sure, Q. 33:44 has "revealed unto all people the promise of 'attainment unto the divine Presence'." Okay. Now I found the "latter" verse. Do I understand Q. 33:44? Sort of. (Not quite!)

Some of Q. 33:40–44 is clear: "To bring you forth from the shadows into the light" refers to the Day of Resurrection.

"Shadows" suggests death. "Light" implies life. "Meet Him" means "meet God."

Problem : If God can't be seen, then what does "meet God" mean?

Note to self : Prophetic code. Got to decode.

Think! Getting close. Thoughts ablaze. Spirit on fire. So I write:

This one single verse, Qur'an 33:40, is at the heart of Muslim theology. Carved in exegetical stone, the sense of ultimacy behind the "Seal of the Prophets" cannot be overruled. At most, it can only be reinterpreted. Baha'u'llah does just that.

His exegesis is dramatic: he points his finger just four verses further to

Qur'an 33:44, a relatively overlooked verse. Suddenly, the reader is transported from the Last Prophet to the Last Day, from the end of prophecy to the end of time. Within a few lines of revealed Arabic, the vision of Muhammad dissolves into the vision of God. ...

The interpretation of "Seal of the Prophets" has traditionally meant the "last of the prophets." The "presence of God," in Baha'u'llah's exegesis, signifies, in effect, the "prophet of the Last Day."

God cannot be seen. The "Presence of God" must be "seen" in the absence of a visible God. The "Presence" is visible; God is not. The "Presence of God" is not God in person but rather the "Person of God." The Bab is such a "Presence." Correspondingly, Qur'an 33:40 is Muhammad; Qur'an 33:44 is the Bab. Exegetically, Qur'an 33:44 is therefore the most crucial of all the verses in Baha'u'llah's argument. — Symbol and Secret, pp. 194–195.

All Muslims believe that Muhammad is the "Seal [Last] of the Prophets," precluding any further Prophets. Yet this Baha'i interpretation of the "Seal of the Prophets" and the "Meeting God" references in the Qur'an shows that divine revelation continues, always providing humanity with new guidance and hope. The Seal of the Prophets: Meeting God on the Last Day

Christopher Buck • Feb 12, 2016 • 1 Comment

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RELIGION PART 8 IN SERIES: FIGURING OUT PROPHECY

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Growing up as a Christian, many times I would hear this expression: "The Bible says." Then the speaker would cite chapter and verse.

The listener would often respond: "Yes, but the Bible also says," offering a counter-verse as proof of a contrary position. It's as if the sacred text was arguing with itself!

Particularly interesting in all sacred texts—and problematic in most—are the prophecies about the Last Day, the Day of Judgment, etc. Why? Because they're hard to figure out. They read easily, but they're puzzling—true of the Bible, and true of the Qur'an.

So let's now consider prophecies of the last days in the Qur'an. Yes,

radical Islam is in the news each and every day. That's a shame, really, because it tarnishes the good name of Islam.

But let's think about traditional Islam, mainstream Islam, where the majority of Muslims are everyday people, like you and I, who want nothing more than to live in peace and prosperity, and who derive much inspiration and guidance from their Faith.

Probably most every Muslim (there are an estimated 2 billion Muslims in the world today) would agree that the Prophet Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets."

This comes from a very important verse in the Qur'an: 33:40. Many regard this verse as the single most important verse in the Qur'an, doctrinally speaking.

With the possible exception of the Ahmadiyya (a new religious movement primarily centered in Pakistan), this means that Muslims consider Muhammad the last prophet. Period. Case closed. End of discussion.

Baha'is agree. Baha'u'llah, in fact, honors Muhammad in the following way, which goes somewhat above and beyond Qur'an 33:40:

Glorified art Thou, O Lord my God! I beseech Thee by Thy Chosen Ones, and by the Bearers of Thy Trust, and by Him Whom Thou hast ordained to be the Seal of Thy Prophets and of Thy Messengers, to let Thy remembrance be my companion, and Thy love my aim, and Thy face my goal, and Thy name my lamp, and Thy wish my desire, and Thy pleasure my delight. — Baha'u'llah, Baha'i Prayers, p. 74.

Now consider: Prophets prophesy. They foretell. According to Baha'i belief, Muhammad was the last of the Prophets, i.e. the last of those who prophesy. In other words, Muhammad was the last Prophet in the "Cycle of Prophecy," which began with Adam.

Okay. Muhammad is the last Prophet. The last to prophesy. What comes next? Who comes next?

Prophecy ends when fulfillment begins. After the "Cycle of Prophecy" comes the "Cycle of Fulfillment."

What does this mean, you ask?

It's simple: Prophecies foretell the future. When prophecies come true, then they are fulfilled. Prophecy becomes fulfillment. That's the way it works.

Around one-third of the Qur'an foretells the Last Day. The Last Day is a good

example of what Baha'is mean by the "Cycle of Fulfillment."

Even though prophets prophesy, their prophecies are not always clear, and often require interpretation. The first choice in interpreting any prophecy means asking this fundamental question: "Is this prophecy literal or figurative?"

So let's take the very first prophecy after Qur'an 33:40. This occurs just four verses later at Qur'an 33:44:

On the day when they will be brought into the presence of their Lord, their greeting to each other will be, "Peace be with you." God has prepared an honorable reward for them. – Qur'an 33:44, translated by Muhammad Sarwar.

Here's another translation of the very same verse:

Their greeting, on the day when they shall meet Him, will be 'Peace!' And He has prepared for them a generous wage. – Qur'an 33:44, translated by A.J. Arberry.

Arberry's translation ("meet Him") is literal. Sardar's translation ("brought into the presence of their Lord") is figurative. This is more in line with the Baha'i understanding.

Now let's use our four-step key to understanding prophecy:

Step 1: If impossible, then not literal. Why is the literal reading not possible here? Here's why: Because it is impossible to meet God directly, face-to-face. The Qur'an itself says so: "No mortal eyes can see Him, but He can see all eyes. He is All-kind and All-aware." – Q. 6:103, translated by Muhammad Sarwar.

Step 2: If not literal, then figurative. What is the comparison or analogy expressed here? What compares to "meeting God"? Let's agree on this: To "meet God" is literal. That's impossible. What is possible is to be "brought into the presence of their Lord," as Sarwar translates.

Step 3: If figurative, then symbolic. What qualities does this symbol represent? What does "meet God" symbolize? Whatever "presence of their Lord" means, it is surely an event in which the will of God is clearly communicated and made known. If we cannot meet God directly, then the next best thing is meeting God's ambassador, God's messenger, or what Baha'is call the "Manifestation of God," who expresses "God" in nature, but not in essence.

Step 4: If symbolic, then spiritual and social. Who (or what) represents those qualities? According to the Baha'i teachings, when God sends humanity a messenger, that messenger comes from the presence of God and therefore represents

God. Whoever has the bounty and blessings of meeting the messenger of God, in a figurative and symbolic way of understanding, has succeeded in “meeting God” by being “brought into the presence of their Lord.”

Think of the “presence of God” as divine charisma, an aura of holiness, the nimbus of the sacred, the halo effect. You may be surprised to know that “charisma” is actually a scientific term used in academia: sociologists of religion talk about the founders of the great world religions as having “charisma.”

I’ve tried my best to simplify the Baha’i understanding of these two key verses of the Qur’an which, in the larger picture, represent the two cycles: the Cycle of Prophecy, which is followed by the Cycle of Fulfillment. Baha’u’llah makes it clear in this important paragraph from his Book of Certitude, addressed to the Islamic world:

And yet, through the mystery of the former verse [Qur’an 33:40], they have turned away from the grace promised by the latter [Qur’an 33:44], despite the fact that “attainment unto the divine Presence” in the “Day of Resurrection” is explicitly stated in the Book. It hath been demonstrated and definitely established, through clear evidences, that by “Resurrection” is meant the rise of the Manifestation of God to proclaim His Cause, and by “attainment unto the divine Presence” is meant attainment unto the presence of His Beauty in the person of His Manifestation. For verily, “No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision.” [Qur’an 6:103.] Notwithstanding all these indubitable facts and lucid statements, they have foolishly clung to the term “seal,” and remained utterly deprived of the recognition of Him Who is the Revealer of both the Seal and the Beginning, in the day of His presence [Baha’u’llah]. – Baha’u’llah, The Book of Certitude, pp. 169-170. (Qur’an citations added in brackets).

WRITTEN BY

Christopher Buck (PhD, JD) attorney and independent scholar, is the author of several books, including: God & Apple Pie (2015), with an introduction by J. Gordon Melton (Distinguished Professor of American Religious History, Baylor... [READ MORE](#)

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RELIGION PART 10 IN SERIES: FIGURING OUT PROPHECY

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Most Muslims agree: since Muhammad is the “Seal of the Prophets” (Quran 33:40), therefore Muhammad is the last prophet, end of story, case closed.

But what if Muhammad is also the gateway for future messengers of God, and not the last of the prophets? Such a possibility would come as a complete surprise to many if not most Muslims. So let's look at a surprising Muslim tradition, which Baha'u'llah himself actually refers to in the Baha'i writings.

In Baha'u'llah's Sura of Patience—revealed on April 22, 1863 in Baghdad on Ridvan, the first day of the Baha'i Festival of Paradise—he wrote:

Recite then unto them that which the celestial Dove of the Spirit hath warbled in the holy Ridván of the Beloved, that perchance they may examine that which hath been elucidated concerning “sealing” by the tongue of him he who is well-grounded in knowledge in the prayer of visitation for the name of God, ‘Alí [Imam ‘Ali]. He hath said—and his word is the truth!—:

“[He (Muhammad) is] the seal of what came before Him and the harbinger of what will appear after Him.”

In such wise hath the meaning of “sealing” been mentioned by the tongue of inaccessible holiness. Thus hath God designated His Friend [Muhammad] to be a seal for the Prophets who preceded Him and a harbinger of the Messengers who will appear after Him. – Baha'u'llah, the Sura of Patience, provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami.

Here, Baha'u'llah quotes from a prayer for Ali, Muhammad's first male follower. Ali later became the prophet's son-in-law when he married Muhammad's beloved daughter Fatima. In Islamic history, Ali

served as the fourth “rightly guided” Caliph, the head of the Faith. Shia Muslims consider Ali as the rightful successor to Muhammad himself. Sunni Muslims disagree—but all Muslims agree that the Prophet Muhammad dearly loved Ali, and that Ali was one of the most revered Muslims of all time.

In a recent book on Baha’u’llah’s Sura of Patience (called *Sayri dar Bustan-i Madinatu’s-Sabr* in Persian)—Dr. Foad Seddigh has pinpointed the exact reference for the prayer which Baha’u’llah originally quoted, which contains this startling line: “[He (Muhammad) is] the seal of what came before Him and the harbinger of what will appear after Him.”

Dr. Seddigh has located and validated this prayer in several authoritative sources. He states that one of its earliest publications is found in a book called *Kamilu’z-Ziyarat*, a well-known Muslim collection of prayers of visitation, or prayers meant to be read at the graves of the Prophet Muhammad, the Shia Imams, and other Shia figures. *Kamilu’z-Ziyarat* was probably compiled by the Shia scholar Ibn Quluya (d. 978 or 979 CE). The eleventh chapter of Ibn Quluya’s book of prayers begins on page 92. This chapter is entitled: “Visiting the grave of the Commander of the Faithful [Imam ‘Ali], how the grave should be visited, and what to pray at the grave.”

You can find the statement Baha’u’llah refers to on p. 97—it is the second “hadith” (tradition) cited. This same statement is also found in prayers of visitation for the shrine of Imam Husayn and in a prayer to be said at the shrines of all of the Imams. The visitation prayer for Imam Ali’s shrine has the exact words Baha’u’llah revealed—verbatim. This prayer, universally recognized and used by Shia Muslims, is variously ascribed to the Sixth and Tenth Imams. (References courtesy of Omid Ghaemmaghami and Dr. Foad Seddigh.)

Baha’u’llah’s understanding of this tradition differs from the traditional understanding by Shia scholars. Dr. Seddigh points out this fact. On page 97 of the *Kamilu’z-Ziyarat*, one Shia scholar (whom Dr. Seddigh quotes) paraphrases the tradition as follows:

“That is to say, [Muhammad] is the seal of the Prophets who appeared before Him or their religious communities, or the knowledge and mysteries that preceded Him, and the harbinger of the Proofs (i.e., the Shi‘i Imams) who will follow Him or the knowledge, sciences, and wisdom that will appear after Him.” (Reference and translation from the original Arabic, courtesy of Omid Ghaemmaghami.)

So who is right? The Shia scholars? Or Baha'u'llah? This much is certain:
Shia scholars and Baha'i scholars agree that
Muhammad is “the harbinger of what will appear after Him. ”

So now we come full circle. All Muslims agree that the prophet Muhammad
foretold the coming of the “Mahdi” in the
future. Sunni and Shia Muslims also agree that Jesus will return at the
culmination of history:

It was narrated ... that the Prophet said: “The Hour will not begin until
'Eisa bin Maryam [Jesus, son of Mary]
comes down as a just judge and a just ruler. – Sunan Ibn Majah 4078.

Both of these two traditions are classified by Sunni scholars as “sound”
that is, fully authentic, and are recognized by Shia
Muslims as well. And so it can truthfully be said that Muhammad is the
“harbinger of what will appear after Him,” and
that this tradition refers to the Mahdi and Jesus, who will appear on the Day
of Judgment.

Baha'is believe that these two end-time saviors—the Mahdi and Jesus—have
already appeared.

The Bab, the forerunner and herald of Baha'u'llah, was none other than the
expected Mahdi, foretold by the prophet
Muhammad. The Bab himself proclaimed:

The divine Revelation associated with the advent of Him Who is your promised
Mihdí [the Mahdi] hath proved far
more wondrous than the Revelation wherewith Muhammad, the Apostle of God, was
invested. Would that ye
might ponder. – Selections From the Writings of the Bab , p. 146.

“To Sunni Islam,” Shoghi Effendi wrote in *God Passes By*, Baha'u'llah
was “the descent of the “Spirit of God” (Jesus
Christ)” – p. 94.

So how do Baha'is understand the Muslim visitation prayer cited above?
Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets,” was “a
seal for the Prophets who preceded Him and a harbinger of the Messengers who
will appear after Him,” meaning the
Bab, Baha'u'llah, and future messengers of God.

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