

The Voice of God and the Supreme Pen:
Some Aspects of the `Letters to Kings and Rulers' of
Muhammad, the Bab (d. 1850) and Baha'-Allah (d. 1892).

Stephen Lambden

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Messianism and religious globalism.

The scriptures and traditions of the world's major religions have it that founder prophets, messiah figures or subsequent religious leaders concretized their worldwide vision by communicating a globally relevant religious message to key rulers and leaders of their day. Such action was a sign of the attempt to convert major sections of humankind in the attempt to make universal their religious message and salvific outlook.

The globalism of Jesus the Galilean messiah

The message of Jesus the Jew was not initially directed to non-Jews, neither Gentiles nor Samaritan Jews. It was thought that the mission to Jews would hardly be

terminated at the parousia or second coming (Matt. 10:5f, 23). Yet the dominical saying “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:25), was speedily transcended, even for the largely Judaic-rooted audience of Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 8:11f). Jesus’ own coming to allow Gentiles a share his kingdom brought the widespread Christian consciousness of a global mission to be consummated by the eschatological Christ (Jeremias, 1982). With the Gentile mission of Paul and the ultimately global mission of the synoptic evangelists (cf. Matt. 6:10 = Lk 11:21, etc), later Christian writers spoke of the evangelizing of all nations. We even find some distinctly universalist sentiments in the complex revelation of John of Patmos (90s CE?). His vision of eschatological times foresaw a period when “the tree of life” would frequently yield many “fruits” the “leaves” of which are specifically said to be “for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2).

According to Matthew’s Gospel, the foreign, gentile Magi came “from the east” (suggestions include Armenia, Babylonia, Parthia [= Persia] and Arabia) to see the infant Jesus, the future Jewish messiah in Jerusalem (Matt. 2:1ff).

By the 3rd-4th century it was not simply that insightful Gentile figures came to Jesus but that Jesus himself was pictured as having addressed certain of them. Jesus came to be believed to have corresponded with at least one foreign, non-Jewish ruler. For the Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (d.339), an exchange of letters took place between Jesus

and Abgar V Uchama ('the Black', 9-46 CE) of Osroene (E. Syria), an early Armenian king of Edessa (Ar. al-Ruha), now Urfa in Turkey (Hist. Ecc. 1.13, II /1:6-7; Acts of Thaddaeus) (Hamman, A., EEC 1:2; Lavenant, R 'Edessa', EEC 1:263). In the light of his alleged conversion by Jesus' messenger Addaeus (Addai), Armenian Christians consider their national church to be the oldest. Tradition has it that Jesus' key disciples or apostles took the Gospel message to many gentile nations. Thomas (= Didymus [the twin] Judas Thomas), for example, is believed in the light of the pseudographical Acts of Thomas (3rd cent. CE?) and other early testimonies (Origen, see Euseb. Ecc. His. III .1.1; Pseud-Clem, Recog. IX.29) to have taken Jesus' message to Persia (= the Parthians) as well as to India (Syriac Acts of Thomas). Among others Thomas is believed to have presented the Christian message to King Gundaphor of [Persia] India (Acts. Thom. sect. II chs. 17ff).

Up until today, evangelically minded Christians continue in their attempt to convert all humanity, to "stand before governors and kings" making an effort to preach the gospel "to all nations" as Christ exhorted them in the Markan Apocalypse and elsewhere (Mk. 13:9b-10a; Matt 24:14 Lk 21:12b, etc). Modern biblical and classical scholarship has affirmed the antiquity and Christian hope of the unity of all humanity (Baldry, H. 1965; Taylor, W., 1981, ABD VI:746-753+bib). Consciousness of a global Christian missionary outreach was strong during the 19th century and was voiced

from time to time in the 20th century. In his Burge Memorial Lecture entitled *Christianity and the Reconciliation of the Nations* (1953), for example, the renowned New Testament scholar Charles. H. Dodd (d. 1973) attempted to rearticulate the Church's "call to transcend nationality in a universal society" and live up to its role as "an instrument in the unity of mankind" (1st ed. Dust jacket).

The globalism of the Arabian prophet Muhammad.

In line with the several universally addressed qur'anic revelations, Muhammad (d. 632 CE) came to proclaim his religious message to all humankind living throughout the world of his day (Q. 34:28; 21:107; 7:158; cf. 52:62; 81:27, etc). He addressed Arabic letters proclaiming the greatness of the Islamic religion to a considerable number of both Arab and non-Arab rulers and notables. Though many modern western scholars consider most, if not all such extant letters of Muhammad, to be apologetic forgeries (Serjeant, CHI 1:139ff), examples are found within a wide range of early Islamic sources, including many Sunni *hadith* collections, such as that of Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241 /855), Muhammad ibn `Abdullah al-Bukhari (d. 256 / 870) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 261 /875), as well as in certain early historically oriented works including the *Sirat al-nabi* (Biography of the Prophet) of Ibn Ishaq (d.150 /767) [as preserved by Ibn Hisham], the *Tabaqat al-kabir* (The Great Book of the Classifications) of Muhammad ibn Sa`d (d. Baghdad 230 /844) and the *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk* (History of

Prophets and Kings) of Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d.310/923).

A wide range of Islamic sources have it that from Medina (in present day Saudi Arabia) around the years 6-7 AH (= 627-9 CE), Muhammad addressed letters to prominent persons, including, for example, al-Muqawqis, the Melkite Christian [Byzantine] Patriarch of Alexandria and alleged Governor of Egypt (Tabari Tarikh VIII, 98f),^[1] the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (Ar. Hiraql, r. 610-641), the Persian Sassanian Emperor (Gk.) Chosroes II (590-628 ; Ar. Kisra = Per. Khusraw), the Byzantine-allied, Monophysite Christian Ghassanid *phylarch* ruler, and governor of Damascus, and to the Negus (Ar. al-Najashi) al-Asham b. Abjar, king of Abyssinia [the Ethiopians]. Various of these letters of Muhammad have been printed singly as well as collectively and certain of them are on public display in various parts of the Muslim world, including the Topkapi palace in Istanbul (Turkey). They are taken to support the now more than millennium-old viewpoint that Muhammad addressed the rulers and notables of his day, being concerned with the guidance and wellbeing of all humanity. On one level this universalism of Muhammad, whether it be genuine or ascribed for apologetic reasons, set the scene for that of the Bab and Baha'u'llah in the 19th century. This example, along with the predicted apocalyptic, worldwide war against evil, are the two key religious and messianically related roots of Babi-Baha'i globalism.

The global outreach of the Sayyid of Shiraz, the Bab

Both the Bab and Baha'u'llah sent communications to leading figures of their day. While details respecting this cannot be fully spelled out here, as messianic figures they both presented a global, eschatologically charged address to humankind and its leaders. This through the dispatch of general and specific communications addressed to various 19th century kings, leaders and notables. As will be seen below in more detail, the Bab to some degree accomplished this with the highly revolutionary first Surah of the *Qayyum al-asma'*, the *Surat al-mulk* (mid. 1844) and other epistles such as his 2-3 page 1845 letter to the Ottoman Sultan `Abd al-Majid Khan (1823-1861).

The global outreach of the Persian claimant Mīrzā Ḥusayn `Ali Bahā'-Allāh

Then, just over 20 years after the Bāb's composition of his *Qayyūm al-asmā'* in the mid.-late 1860s and the early 1870s, his contemporary Baha'-Allah addressed the Ottoman rulers and other kings and leaders of the word collectively in his *Surat al-muluk* (c. 1866, "Surah of the Kings"), also subsequently sending specific scriptural Tablets (alwah) to, for example, the following leading 19th century figures: [\[2\]](#)

- (1) the Italian Pope, Giovanni Maria-Mastai Ferretti, Pope Pius IX (1792-1878);

- (2) the French Emperor Louis-Napoleon III (1808-73);
- (3) the Russian Czar Nicholas II (1838-81);
- (4) the British Queen Victoria (1819-1901);
- (5) the Persian Nasir al-Din Shah (1833-96).

Baha'u'llah also addressed such communications in his important *al-Kitab al-aqdas* (Most Holy Book, c. 1873), to the German Kaiser Wilhelm (1797-1888) and, aside from other significant figures, to the 'Rulers of America and Presidents of the Republics therein' (Aqdas, ¶ 88, p. 52). Elsewhere after 1307/1889, for example, he appears to have indirectly communicated through the Persian Jewish convert 'Azizullah Jadhhab Khurasani (d. 1934) with a representative the Jewish world, most probably, the French born Jewish philanthropist Baron Edmond James de Rothschild (1845-1934) (Sulaymani, Masabih 7:475). Known as "Father of the Yishuv" (Palestinian Jewish community) he visited and was active in assisting Jewish settlement within Ottoman Palestine.

These letters to kings and rulers were seen by Baha'-Allāh in one of his scriptural Tablets to Nabil Zarandi (d. 1892) as powerful qur'anic-rooted expressions of the creative word of God. On an eschatological level he viewed them as universally potent encapsulations of end time "calamity", "judgement" and "catastrophe" (Iqtidarāt, 298; Lambden, 1999-2000; Shoghi Effendi, PDC: 46; cf. GPB: 212).

Tradition has it, then, that Jesus and Muhammad as well later as the Bab and Baha'u'llah, addressed all humanity and certain of its leaders. Their call was universal though not all responded to their summons. Abrahamic, pre-Baha'i religious texts and traditions have it that religion would ultimately be made truly global through acts of eschatological war and divine judgment. The universal spread of religion, it is widely predicted, would become known in eschatological times through, among other things, a supernatural, universal or messianic call, an unearthly address to all humankind. [3]

In more concrete terms there is to be a final war between the forces of good and evil which will result in the universal establishment of order and truth. One or more warrior-messiah figures along with an elect would induce many of the peoples of the whole world to turn towards God. Those that refuse meet an unpleasant end as spelled out in various apocalyptic texts. This final act of universal "holy war" should be supplemented by acts of supernatural divine intervention such that the whole world would become an earthly expression of the heavenly "kingdom of God". Elements of these traditions will now be examined in the light of the religious roots of Babi-Baha'i universalism and globalism.

[1] For further details refer Serjeant, CHI 1:139ff. This writer notes that a document in "Himyaritic" characters allegedly addressed by the Prophet to the Kings of Himyar was 'discovered' in Beirut. See also al-Tabari, VIII, 'The Victory of Islam', trans. Fishbane, p.98ff; Grohmann EI (Brill rep. 1987) on al-Muqawqis, VI: 712-715.

[2] MacEoin's introduction to his article 'Baha'ism' in the 1st edition of the (Hinnells ed.), *Handbook of Living Religions* takes little or no account of the early globalistic outreach of the Bab and Baha'u'llah.

[3] On the basis of numerous “sound” traditions many Muslims similarly expect the advent of their messiah to be announced internationally through a superhuman heavenly or angelic “call” (al-nida’). These and many similar messianic traditions receive detailed exegesis in Babi-Baha’i scripture. They are often subject to a radical demythologization through the utilization of an inner or a “spiritual” hermeneutic. The “signs” of the last days are considered “fulfilled” on a worldwide level and all peoples deemed subject to an eschatological “judgement” in the light of their awareness of the messianic advent (Lambden,1988, Elr. VIII:581). The nature and effects of the universal, eschatological “call” (al-nida’) are detailed in many books of Shi’i tradition which spell out the various signs of the advent of the Qa’im, including the Kitab al-Ghayba of al-Nu`mani where a tradition of Imam Ja`far has it that the eschatological “call” will be heard by all peoples “in their own language” as well as by the peoples of both the East and West (Numani, Ghayba, 172ff; esp.176-8; 186-7; see also Majlisi, Bihar 52:244). Biblical intimations of the universality of the last days or messianic advent include Isaiah 40:5, “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together” and Rev. 1:7 “Behold, he is coming with clouds, every eye will see him”.

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