
The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

I have in the preceding chapters endeavored to trace the rise and progress of the Faith associated with the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh during the first fifty years of its existence. If I have dwelt too long on the events connected with the life and mission of these twin Luminaries of the Bahá'í Revelation, if I have at times indulged in too circumstantial a narrative of certain episodes related to their ministries, it is solely because these happenings proclaim the birth, and signalize the establishment, of an epoch which future historians will acclaim as the most heroic, the most tragic and the most momentous period in the Apostolic Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation. Indeed the tale which the subsequent decades of the century under review unfold to our eyes is but the record of the manifold evidences of the resistless operation of those creative forces which the revolution of fifty years of almost uninterrupted Revelation had released.

A dynamic process, divinely propelled, possessed of undreamt-of potentialities, world-embracing in scope, world-transforming in its ultimate consequences, had been set in motion on that memorable night when the Báb communicated the purpose of His mission to Mullá Husayn in an obscure corner of Shiráz. It acquired a tremendous momentum with the first intimations of Bahá'u'lláh's dawning Revelation amidst the darkness of the Siyáh-Chál of Tihrán. It was further accelerated by the Declaration of His mission on the eve of His banishment from Baghdád. It moved to a climax with the proclamation of that same mission during the tempestuous years of His exile in Adrianople. Its full significance was disclosed when the Author of that Mission issued His historic summonses, appeals and warnings to the kings of the earth and the world's ecclesiastical leaders. It was finally consummated by the laws and ordinances which He formulated, by the principles which He enunciated and by the institutions which He ordained during the concluding years of His ministry in the prison-city of 'Akká.

To direct and canalize these forces let loose by this Heaven-sent process, and to insure their harmonious and continuous operation after His ascension, an instrument divinely ordained, invested with indisputable

authority, organically linked with the Author of the Revelation Himself, was clearly indispensable. That instrument Bahá'u'lláh had expressly provided through the institution of the Covenant, an institution which He had firmly established prior to His ascension. This same Covenant He had anticipated in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas, had alluded to it as He bade His last farewell to the members of His family, who had been summoned to His bed-side, in the days immediately preceding His ascension, and had incorporated it in a special document which He designated as "***the Book of My Covenant***," and which He entrusted, during His last illness, to His eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Written entirely in His own hand; unsealed, on the ninth day after His ascension in the presence of nine witnesses chosen from amongst His companions and members of His Family; read subsequently, on the afternoon of that same day, before a large company assembled in His Most Holy Tomb, including His sons, some of the Báb's kinsmen, pilgrims and resident believers, this unique and epoch making Document, designated by Bahá'u'lláh as His "***Most Great Tablet***," and alluded to by Him as the "***Crimson Book***" in His "***Epistle to the Son of the Wolf***," can find no parallel in the Scriptures of any previous Dispensation, not excluding that of the Báb Himself. For nowhere in the books pertaining to any of the world's religious systems, not even among the writings of the Author of the Bábí Revelation, do we find any single document establishing a Covenant endowed with an authority comparable to the Covenant which Bahá'u'lláh had Himself instituted.

"So firm and mighty is this Covenant," He Who is its appointed Center has affirmed, ***"that from the beginning of time until the present day no religious Dispensation hath produced its like."*** ***"It is in dubitably clear,"*** He, furthermore, has stated, ***"that the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant."*** ***"Know thou,"*** He has written, ***"that the 'Sure Handle' mentioned from the foundation of the world in the Books, the Tablets and the Scriptures of old is naught else but the Covenant and the Testament."*** And again: ***"The lamp of the Covenant is the light of the world, and the words traced by the Pen of the Most High a limitless ocean."*** ***"The Lord, the All-Glorified,"*** He has moreover declared, ***"hath, beneath the shade of the Tree of Anísá (Tree of Life), made a new Covenant and established a great Testament . . . Hath such a Covenant been established in any previous Dispensation, age, period or century? Hath such a Testament, set down by the Pen of the Most High, ever been***

witnessed? No, by God!" And finally: "*The power of the Covenant is as the heat of the sun which quickeneth and promoteth the development of all created things on earth. The light of the Covenant, in like manner, is the educator of the minds, the spirits, the hearts and souls of men.*" To this same Covenant He has in His writings referred as the "*Conclusive Testimony,*" the "*Universal Balance,*" the "*Magnet of God's grace,*" the "*Upraised Standard,*" the "*Irrefutable Testament,*" "*the all-mighty Covenant, the like of which the sacred Dispensations of the past have never witnessed*" and "*one of the distinctive features of this most mighty cycle.*"

Extolled by the writer of the Apocalypse as "*the Ark of His (God) Testament*"; associated with the gathering beneath the "*Tree of Anísá*" (Tree of Life) mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh in the Hidden Words; glorified by Him, in other passages of His writings, as the "*Ark of Salvation*" and as "*the Cord stretched betwixt the earth and the Abhá Kingdom,*" this Covenant has been bequeathed to posterity in a Will and Testament which, together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and several Tablets, in which the rank and station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are unequivocally disclosed, constitute the chief buttresses designed by the Lord of the Covenant Himself to shield and support, after His ascension, the appointed Center of His Faith and the Delineator of its future institutions.

In this weighty and incomparable Document its Author discloses the character of that "*excellent and priceless heritage*" bequeathed by Him to His "*heirs*"; proclaims afresh the fundamental purpose of His Revelation; enjoins the "*peoples of the world*" to hold fast to that which will "*elevate*" their "*station*"; announces to them that "*God hath forgiven what is past*"; stresses the sublimity of man's station; discloses the primary aim of the Faith of God; directs the faithful to pray for the welfare of the kings of the earth, "*the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God*"; invests them with the rulership of the earth; singles out as His special domain the hearts of men; forbids categorically strife and contention; commands His followers to aid those rulers who are "*adorned with the ornament of equity and justice*"; and directs, in particular, the Aghsán (His sons) to ponder the "*mighty force and the consummate power that lieth concealed in the world of being.*" He bids them, moreover, together with the Afnáns (the Báb's kindred) and His own relatives, to "*turn, one and all, unto the Most Great Branch ('Abdu'l-Bahá)*"; identifies Him with "*the One Whom God hath*"

purposed," "Who hath branched from this pre-existent Root," referred to in the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas; ordains the station of the *"Greater Branch"* (Mírzá Muhammad-'Alí) to be beneath that of the *"Most Great Branch"* ('Abdu'l-Bahá); exhorts the believers to treat the Aghsán with consideration and affection; counsels them to respect His family and relatives, as well as the kindred of the Báb; denies His sons *"any right to the property of others"*; enjoins on them, on His kindred and on that of the Báb to *"fear God, to do that which is meet and seemly"* and to follow the things that will *"exalt"* their station; warns all men not to allow *"the means of order to be made the cause of confusion, and the instrument of union an occasion for discord"*; and concludes with an exhortation calling upon the faithful to *"serve all nations,"* and to strive for the *"betterment of the world."*

That such a unique and sublime station should have been conferred upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not, and indeed could not, surprise those exiled companions who had for so long been privileged to observe His life and conduct, nor the pilgrims who had been brought, however fleetingly, into personal contact with Him, nor indeed the vast concourse of the faithful who, in distant lands, had grown to revere His name and to appreciate His labors, nor even the wide circle of His friends and acquaintances who, in the Holy Land and the adjoining countries, were already well familiar with the position He had occupied during the lifetime of His Father.

He it was Whose auspicious birth occurred on that never-to-be forgotten night when the Báb laid bare the transcendental character of His Mission to His first disciple Mullá Husayn. He it was Who, as a mere child, seated on the lap of Táhirih, had registered the thrilling significance of the stirring challenge which that indomitable heroine had addressed to her fellow-disciple, the erudite and far famed Vahíd. He it was Whose tender soul had been seared with the ineffaceable vision of a Father, haggard, dishevelled, freighted with chains, on the occasion of a visit, as a boy of nine, to the Síyáh-Chál of Tihran. Against Him, in His early childhood, whilst His Father lay a prisoner in that dungeon, had been directed the malice of a mob of street urchins who pelted Him with stones, vilified Him and overwhelmed Him with ridicule. His had been the lot to share with His Father, soon after His release from imprisonment, the rigors and miseries of a cruel banishment from His native land, and the trials which culminated in His enforced withdrawal to the mountains of Kurdistan. He it was Who, in His inconsolable grief at His separation from an adored Father, had confided to Nabíl, as attested by him in his narrative, that He

felt Himself to have grown old though still but a child of tender years. His had been the unique distinction of recognizing, while still in His childhood, the full glory of His Father's as yet unrevealed station, a recognition which had impelled Him to throw Himself at His feet and to spontaneously implore the privilege of laying down His life for His sake. From His pen, while still in His adolescence in Baghdád, had issued that superb commentary on a well-known Muhammadan tradition, written at the suggestion of Bahá'u'lláh, in answer to a request made by 'Alí-Shawkat Páshá, which was so illuminating as to excite the unbounded admiration of its recipient. It was His discussions and discourses with the learned doctors with whom He came in contact in Baghdad that first aroused that general admiration for Him and for His knowledge which was steadily to increase as the circle of His acquaintances was widened, at a later date, first in Adrianople and then in 'Akká. It was to Him that the highly accomplished Khurshíd Páshá, the governor of Adrianople, had been moved to pay a public and glowing tribute when, in the presence of a number of distinguished divines of that city, his youthful Guest had, briefly and amazingly, resolved the intricacies of a problem that had baffled the minds of the assembled company— an achievement that affected so deeply the Páshá that from that time onwards he could hardly reconcile himself to that Youth's absence from such gatherings.

On Him Bahá'u'lláh, as the scope and influence of His Mission extended, had been led to place an ever greater degree of reliance, by appointing Him, on numerous occasions, as His deputy, by enabling Him to plead His Cause before the public, by assigning Him the task of transcribing His Tablets, by allowing Him to assume the responsibility of shielding Him from His enemies, and by investing Him with the function of watching over and promoting the interests of His fellow-exiles and companions. He it was Who had been commissioned to undertake, as soon as circumstances might permit, the delicate and all-important task of purchasing the site that was to serve as the permanent resting-place of the Báb, of insuring the safe transfer of His remains to the Holy Land, and of erecting for Him a befitting sepulcher on Mt. Carmel. He it was Who had been chiefly instrumental in providing the necessary means for Bahá'u'lláh's release from His nine-year confinement within the city walls of 'Akká, and in enabling Him to enjoy, in the evening of His life, a measure of that peace and security from which He had so long been debarred. It was through His unremitting efforts that the illustrious Badí had been granted his memorable interviews with Bahá'u'lláh, that the hostility evinced by several governors of 'Akká towards the exiled community had been

transmuted into esteem and admiration, that the purchase of properties adjoining the Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan had been effected, and that the ablest and most valuable presentation of the early history of the Faith and of its tenets had been transmitted to posterity. It was through the extraordinarily warm reception accorded Him during His visit to Beirut, through His contact with Midhat Páshá, a former Grand Vizir of Turkey, through His friendship with 'Azíz Páshá, whom He had previously known in Adrianople, and who had subsequently been promoted to the rank of Valí, and through His constant association with officials, notables and leading ecclesiastics who, in increasing number had besought His presence, during the final years of His Father's ministry, that He had succeeded in raising the prestige of the Cause He had championed to a level it had never previously attained.

He alone had been accorded the privilege of being called "*the Master,*" an honor from which His Father had strictly excluded all His other sons. Upon Him that loving and unerring Father had chosen to confer the unique title of "*Sirru'lláh*" (the Mystery of God), a designation so appropriate to One Who, though essentially human and holding a station radically and fundamentally different from that occupied by Bahá'u'lláh and His Forerunner, could still claim to be the perfect Exemplar of His Faith, to be endowed with superhuman knowledge, and to be regarded as the stainless mirror reflecting His light. To Him, whilst in Adrianople, that same Father had, in the Súriy-i-Ghusn (Tablet of the Branch), referred as "*this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness,*" as "*the Limb of the Law of God,*" as His "*most great favor*" unto men, as His "*most perfect bounty*" conferred upon them, as One through Whom "*every mouldering bone is quickened,*" declaring that "*whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God,*" and that "*they who deprive themselves of the shadow of the Branch are lost in the wilderness of error.*" To Him He, whilst still in that city, had alluded (in a Tablet addressed to Hájí Muhammad Ibráhím-i-Khalíl) as the one amongst His sons "*from Whose tongue God will cause the signs of His power to stream forth,*" and as the one Whom "*God hath specially chosen for His Cause.*" On Him, at a later period, the Author of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, in a celebrated passage, subsequently elucidated in the "*Book of My Covenant,*" had bestowed the function of interpreting His Holy Writ, proclaiming Him, at the same time, to be the One "*Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.*" To Him in a Tablet, revealed during that same period and addressed to Mírzá Muhammad Qulíy-i-Sabzivarí, He had referred as "*the Gulf that*

hath branched out of this Ocean that hath encompassed all created things," and bidden His followers to turn their faces towards it. To Him, on the occasion of His visit to Beirut, His Father had, furthermore, in a communication which He dictated to His amanuensis, paid a glowing tribute, glorifying Him as the One *"round Whom all names revolve,"* as *"the Most Mighty Branch of God,"* and as *"His ancient and immutable Mystery."* He it was Who, in several Tablets which Bahá'u'lláh Himself had penned, had been personally addressed as *"the Apple of Mine eye,"* and been referred to as *"a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth,"* as *"a shelter for all mankind"* and *"a stronghold for whosoever hath believed in God."* It was on His behalf that His Father, in a prayer revealed in His honor, had supplicated God to *"render Him victorious,"* and to *"ordain . . . for Him, as well as for them that love Him,"* the things destined by the Almighty for His *"Messengers"* and the *"Trustees"* of His Revelation. And finally in yet another Tablet these weighty words had been recorded: *"The glory of God rest upon Thee, and upon whosoever serveth Thee and circleth around Thee. Woe, great woe, betide him that opposeth and injureth Thee. Well is it with him that sweareth fealty to Thee; the fire of hell torment him who is Thy enemy."*

And now to crown the inestimable honors, privileges and benefits showered upon Him, in ever increasing abundance, throughout the forty years of His Father's ministry in Baghdád, in Adrianople and in 'Akká, He had been elevated to the high office of Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, and been made the successor of the Manifestation of God Himself—a position that was to empower Him to impart an extraordinary impetus to the international expansion of His Father's Faith, to amplify its doctrine, to beat down every barrier that would obstruct its march, and to call into being, and delineate the features of, its Administrative Order, the Child of the Covenant, and the Harbinger of that World Order whose establishment must needs signalize the advent of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation.