

EXPLANATIONS CONCERNING
PASSAGE NO. 1 OF THE PERSIAN
HIDDEN WORDS

4

4.1 Introduction

In the name of the Lord of Utterance, the Mighty:
O YE PEOPLE THAT HAVE MINDS TO KNOW AND EARS TO
HEAR!

The first call of the Beloved is this:

O mystic nightingale!

Abide not but in the rose-garden of the spirit. O messenger of the Solomon of love! Seek thou no shelter except in the Sheba of the well-beloved, and O immortal phoenix! dwell not save on the mount of faithfulness. Therein is thy habitation, if on the wings of thy soul thou soarest to the realm of the infinite and seekest to attain thy goal.”*

Understanding these first lines of the Persian section of the Hidden Words is essential for two reasons. For one thing, understanding this passage makes it easier to understand the

* Persian 1.

meaning of subsequent verses and to base this understanding on a general impression of the book as a whole. It not only sets out the meaning and purpose of the Persian part of the book but is also the key that can enable us to fathom the depths of this work. For another thing, this passage contains numerous mystical terms and literary allusions, and interpreting these can be the first step towards comprehending the mysteries contained in the book.

This first passage of the Persian *Hidden Words* is concerned with the reality of man. We are addressed using names which express our spiritual reality: “*O mystic nightingale!*”, “*O messenger of the Solomon of love!*” and “*O immortal phoenix!*” These names give us a sense of our true home. They reveal the goal of our life. The soul is likened to a bird – this bird, which symbolises our true nature, is called upon to rise up and soar into the heavens. At the end of its journey, its soaring flight, the bird of the human soul should reach the destination intended by God: the “rose-garden of the spirit” or the “mount of faithfulness”. All these images and symbols describe the state of the human soul (*nafs*)* that has responded to the call to rise up and to set out consciously and with determination along the path of gradual perfection until it finds its exalted home or “habitation” (*watan*) in the “rose-garden of the spirit” (*rúh*).

An important key to understanding the Persian *Hidden Words* is the fact that many of the terms of address used at the start of the individual verses are intended as a call to the human soul (the rational soul). In the eighty-two sections of this divine work of scripture, Bahá'u'lláh intends to show us how we can attain the goal of our existence, namely by leading the soul (*nafs*) with which we have been bestowed, to the level of divine, heavenly spirit. Guidance is

* *Nafs* = soul, psyche or self. This term implies both the various levels of the soul and the human psyche, the self. This is a reality which can develop in a positive, divine way by turning towards God, but which can also tend towards the negative, becoming self-centred and attached to the material world (“the earth”).

given through the influence of the Word of God, and through this influence a child is born of the spirit, the child being called “faith”. With this new birth we attain the goal of our life, we enter into the garden of the spirit, and the “human spirit” (the rational soul) is transformed into the “spirit of faith” which enables us to partake in the blessings of the Holy Spirit from the heavenly realm (*malakút*). Bahá’u’lláh also speaks of this “exalted home of the soul” in the next sections of the Persian *Hidden Words*, in which he then asks:

[...] Whither can a lover go, but to the land [watan homeland] of his beloved? And what seeker findeth rest away from his heart’s desire? *

The long obligatory prayer also mentions the yearning of the heart for this “exalted home” when the worshipper says: “[...] *Thou seest, o my Lord, this stranger hastening to his most exalted home (watan) beneath the canopy of Thy majesty and within the precincts of Thy mercy*”.[†] This stranger who so impatiently seeks his home is none other than the soul of man, which expresses in ardent prayerfulness its fervent desire to attain the abode of the Beloved.[‡] The exciting story of this spiritual journey is described in the eighty-two passages of the Persian *Hidden Words*—a poetic journey along the path that leads to perfection, which Bahá’u’lláh himself refers to in

* Persian 4

† *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 319.

‡ This condition of the soul recurs frequently in the mystic tradition. Jalaluddin Rumi begins his world-famous “*Mathnawí*” with the example of a reed that is broken and made into a reed pipe (Ney). All the sounds that emanate from this Ney take the form of lamentation and plaintive weeping, a symbolic expression of yearning to return to one’s real home:

Hearken to the reed flute, how it complains,

lamenting its banishment from its home:

“Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,

my plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears”[...]

(from: *The Mathnawí of Maulana Jalalu-,D-Din Muhammad Rumi*, Abridged and Translated by E.H. Whinfield, 1898)

the final passage as the “path of detachment”. With patience and anticipation, He guides us through this poetic journey. By pointing the way, making recommendations and issuing admonitions, He shows us the path and lists the dangers, full of care about our fate. It is the story of the eternal love of God for mankind, the story of humanity’s disloyalty, the story of suffering and of the tears of the beloved of God, and not least the story of the Covenant of God with mankind. We should therefore approach this book with an open heart and immerse ourselves in the loving, deeply mystical verses of this work, a work in which the yearning of a loving Creator is revealed to the entire human race. This loving Creator continues to love mankind in spite of its disloyalty, its defiance, its rebelliousness, its unkindness and disobedience, showing it the right way and caringly observing whether or not His creatures choose the “path of detachment”.

This path is not an easy one. There are some difficult parts, and if we now consider some of these, it should help us to attain a more profound understanding of the mystical contents and to discern some hidden truths, thus bringing joy to our hearts and broadening the horizons of our thoughts. However, before discussing the individual symbols and images, it would seem appropriate to clarify the mystical significance of three basic terms that occur repeatedly in the *Hidden Words*. These are:

4.2 Spirit, Soul and Heart

First of all, let us use an image to clarify the relationship between these different realities and their respective domains. In doing so, we will disregard academic, philosophical and theological discussions. For this symbolic image is better able to give us a clear understanding of a motif that occurs frequently in the Persian *Hidden Words*: the motif of the struggle between the soul (interpreted as the ego = Ichhaftigkeit) and the spirit to gain possession of the heart. This image originates from the school of Oriental mysticism

(Súfism) and is to be understood as follows: the spirit (*rúh*), which has its origin in the divine reality (*amr* Logos)^{*}, is represented by vertical rays which shine down from the Heaven of the divine Will (*amr*) and touch the human soul, bringing it to life. The psyche, ego, or soul (*nafs*) is the human capacity to assimilate this spirit and is illustrated by means of a horizontal line. The intersection of the two, the point where the spirit meets the soul of man, is the heart (*qalb*). *Qalb* is the reality of man and has the ability to become transformed. It can develop into a good, enlightened, generous heart or into a narrow-minded, egoistic, hard, dark heart. The word *qalb* literally means “ability to change”, for in Arabic it not only means “heart” but is also the root of many derivatives which all point to the possibility of conversion.

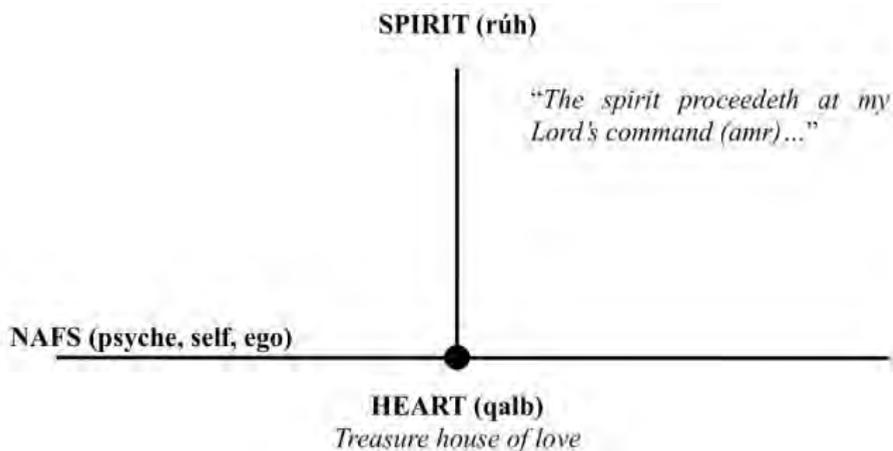


Fig. 1: Soul, spirit and heart

If we now view this image from the perspective of relationships, we can say that the most profound depths of the mystic path and of spiritual development are shown here! The heart is the seat of the love and knowledge of God. The spirit and the psyche both seek to take possession of this abode. If the indivi-

^{*} Cf. Qur’án Q 17:85: “[...] *And they will ask thee of the Spirit. Say: The Spirit proceedeth at my Lord’s command (amr); [...]*”

dual permits his heart to become the seat of passion, greed, envy, egotism and lies, then he has allowed the “enemy” to live in his home instead of the “friend”. His heart then becomes dark and narrow and falls prey to hatred, anger and passions. But if the spirit, the Word of God, illuminates his heart and is permitted to enter the house of the friend, then the candle of the love of God is ignited in a corner of his heart. The king enters his palace and drives the robbers out of its chambers. The heart becomes the treasure of understanding and the repository of the divine mysteries. In this case, the heart is a spiritual heart, illuminated by Heaven. Then Bahá’u’lláh’s statement applies to the heart: “*The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power*”.¹ Many passages in the Persian *Hidden Words* refer to this struggle between the spirit (*rúh*) and the psyche/ego (*nafs*). Some verses clearly demonstrate this dualism, a dualism that is used in the *Hidden Words* as a means of expressing spiritual relationships and which is seldom found with such clarity in Bahá’u’lláh’s later scripture. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the wealth of meaning contained in this image:

Hast thou ever heard that friend and foe should abide in the same heart? Cast out then the stranger, that the Friend may enter His home.²

Wouldst thou have Me, seek none other than Me; [...] for My will and the will of another than Me, even as fire and water, cannot dwell within one heart.³

Let us turn our spiritual eye once again to the verses of the first passage and view them as a coherent image. It is the story of a spiritual journey expressed in mystic and symbolic language. The “mystic nightingale” that is to seek its place in the “rose-garden of the spirit”, the “messenger of the Solomon of love” who finds refuge only with the Queen of Sheba, or the “immortal

phoenix” who is to settle on the “mount of faithfulness” – all these symbols refer to the human reality, which should seek its goal and the meaning of life in the unfolding of its spiritual powers, should advance along the path of development to rise up from the lowest levels of creation to the loftiest heights of the spiritual realm and consciously attain its spiritual destination, the exalted abode of the Beloved, so that the “stranger” can find rest in the “*most exalted home* (see above)”⁴ of the Friend and the bird of the heart can reach its nest in the glory of the spirit⁵.

4.3 Self, Psyche, Nafs

In its English or German translation (‘self’ or ‘Selbst’), the term *nafs* is often understood in the negative sense, as in Persian *Hidden Word* no. 40, for example: “[...] *loose thy soul from the prison of self(nafs)*” or in no. 22: “[...] *notwithstanding, thou didst remain so wrapt in the veil of self(nafs), that thine eyes beheld not the beauty of the Beloved*[...]”, but in some cases it is interpreted in a positive sense, i.e. when it is qualified by a spiritual or divine attribute, as in Persian *Hidden Word* no. 17: “[...] *and even of these few, none but the smallest handful hath been found with a pure heart and a sanctified spirit*”^{*} (*nafs*). In no. 38 the contrast between these two interpretations of the term *nafs* becomes very clear: “[...] *Renounce thyself(nafs) and, filled with the spirit of mercy (nafs-i rahmání = divine nafs), abide in the realm of celestial sanctity.*” And no. 72 reads: “*Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self(nafs) and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world.*” Shoghi Effendi clarifies the two different meanings of this term as follows:

[...] Self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Baha’i writings; one is self, the identity of the individual

^{*} In my opinion, “soul” would be a better translation here. (D.M.)

created by God. This is the self-mentioned in such passages as “he hath known God who hath known himself”, etc. The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection.⁶

At one point, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that true heroism is victory over the dark side of the self, for one can quite easily defeat West and East, whereas victory over oneself and the forces of selfishness is extremely difficult.⁷

Bahá'u'lláh describes the reality of the soul (*nafs*) in the following way:

Know verily that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, first to recognise His Glory, to cleave to His truth and to bow down in adoration before Him. If it be faithful to God, it will reflect His light, and will eventually return to Him. If it fail, however, in its allegiance to its Creator, it will become a victim to self and passion, and will, in the end, sink in their depths⁸.

Elsewhere Bahá'u'lláh states that *nafs*/self/soul possesses two wings. If it soars up to the heaven of love and contentment, it will be assigned to God, but if it steers towards lust and passion, it will fall victim to these vices.⁹ In the light of such explanations, it is possible to understand why the self (*nafs*) is described and appraised in different ways. At one time this term is used to refer to the worldly, base, egotistical self, an animalistic soul that follows the

dictates of its desires and passions. In another context we speak of enlightened, righteous, loving, noble, kindly souls who are willing to make sacrifices. In this case we mean the souls of individuals that have attained the station of divine, heavenly contentment and have torn apart the veil of the baser self, the appetitive soul.

Summary

In general, it can be said that in the *Hidden Words*, in the *Seven Valleys* and also in other writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the word *nafs* is most frequently used in its negative sense, as a concept signifying lust, passion, selfishness and suchlike. In such cases one speaks of the “appetitive soul” (*nafs-i ammarih*)^{*}. The higher qualities of the soul are implied by such phrases as “benevolent soul” (*nafs-i-rádíyyih*) or “inspired soul” (*nafs-i mulhim-i*) etc.¹⁰ By contrast, wherever the word spirit (*rúh*) appears, there is a definite positive connotation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the term “rational soul” designates the same thing as the “human spirit”. Only when this soul or human spirit is endowed with the gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit can it be transformed into the “spirit of faith” and enter the Kingdom of Heaven:

The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two names –the human spirit and the rational soul– designate one thing. This spirit, which, in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings and, as far as human ability permits, discovers the reality of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects and of the qualities and properties of beings. But the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted

^{*} Mentioned in the Qur'án (12:53) as *an-nafs al-ammára bi's-sú*, “the soul [which] enjoineth unto evil”

with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities. It is like a mirror, which, although clear, polished and brilliant is still in need of light. Until a ray of the sun reflects upon it, it cannot discover the heavenly secrets.¹¹

In the schools of mysticism, the goal is to continue walking this path until such time as in our innermost reality faith and certitude are attained. This is also the goal and purpose of the *Hidden Words*. Shoghi Effendi describes this book as “spiritual leaven” and

The significance of this dynamic spiritual leaven cast into the life of the world for the reorientation of the minds of men, the edification of their souls and the rectification of their conduct can best be judged by the description of its character given in the opening passage by its Author: “*This is that which hath descended from the Realm of Glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfill in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue.*”¹²

4.4 Heart

Just as it is impossible to put into words the essence of what is meant by ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, the word ‘heart’ in its spiritual sense defies definition. The ‘heart’ might perhaps be described as ‘the reality of mankind’, a symbolic stage on which the entire drama of the soul unfolds. In religious and mystic literature this heart is the “home of the Beloved”. This Beloved could be God, Christ, Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, the Báb or Bahá’u’lláh. Because it carries all the possibilities of transformation in it, the heart can

also contain evil, hate, greed, animosity and darkness. It can be attached to all kinds of goods and chattels in this material world. Here, however, we wish to direct our attention towards the condition of the heart in its noble, exalted, original purity and in full possession of its potential for spiritual development.

In many passages of the Arabian and Persian *Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh describes the attributes and characteristic features of the heart. Here are just a few examples:

O Son of Being! Thy heart is my home. Sanctify it for my descent.¹³

O Son of Dust! All that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart, which I have made the habitation of my beauty and glory.¹⁴

In another passage Bahá'u'lláh laments the fact that humanity does not always value this gift from God, allowing its heart to be entrapped by baser things. He states sadly:

[...] yet thou didst give my home and dwelling to another [...]¹⁵

Furthermore, the heart is described as the “treasury” of divine mysteries. Sufi literature often uses the word “ruins” as a symbol for the heart because valuable treasures were often hidden and buried in ruins. Similarly, the treasures of the mysteries and secrets of God are preserved and hidden in the human heart. In the *Book of Certitude* Bahá'u'lláh attests to the sublime role of the heart:

O my brother, when a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired

knowledge and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, that hate repel him away from the truth [...] ¹⁶

Similarly, in his mystic masterpiece *The Seven Valleys* He testifies to the presence of the revelation of light in human hearts:

The reflected splendour of this light is in the hearts, but it is concealed by the veil of intellect and the factors of earthly existence like a candle in an iron bell and only when one removes the bell will the light beneath it shine. ¹⁷ (20)

It is exactly this mystery that no. 32 of the Persian Hidden Words alludes to: “The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power”.

4.4.1 Purity of heart

The first step on the path of spiritual development consists in cleansing the heart of all dust and removing all veils which prevent us from turning the mirror of the heart towards the spiritual sun. Bahá’u’lláh’s statement in the Arabic *Hidden Words* emphatically confirms this:

O Son of Spirit! My first counsel is this: possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting. ¹⁸

And also:

O Son of Glory! Be swift in the path of holiness and enter the heaven of communion with Me. Cleanse thy heart with the burnish of the spirit and hasten to the court of the Most High.¹⁹

Both passages show that a clear connection exists between the process of the purification of the heart and the treading of the “path”.

What is at the end of this “path”? The first passage in the Persian *Hidden Words* considers this question. While the goal is described there in mystic metaphorical language as the “*mount of faithfulness*”, “*the Sheba of the well-beloved*” or “*rose-garden of the spirit*”, in the Arabian *Hidden Words* no.1 it is referred to as “*everlasting sovereignty*” and in the Persian *Hidden Words* no.8 the concept “*court of the Most High*” is used. Further symbols such as “*the sanctuary of the Beloved*”, “*portals of the Friend*”, “*Gefilde des wahren Seins*”, “*canopy of Thy Majesty*”²⁰ etc. also describe this exalted station, which is intended as the ultimate goal to be attained by the soul at the end of the path.

4.4.2 The different spiritual levels of the heart

Another way of attaining a better understanding of these themes associated with the characteristics and potentials of the heart is to become familiar with the various capacities of the heart. In Persian and Arabic there are a number of words with similar meanings to *qalb* (“heart”). In the Bahá’í writings, for example, one often encounters related words such as *sadr* (breast) or *fu’ad* (meaning sometimes heart and sometimes conscience, and translated accordingly).

Elucidations of these concepts made by oriental mystics can also be of assistance – although this is not to say their interpretations always fully concur with the Bahá’í writings. According to these elucidations, the “heart” has seven different spiritual capacities or levels of spiritual perception and experience, called *tawr* (pl. *atwar*; type, stage, condition). We will attempt –as far as possible– to provide examples from the Bahá’í writings to demonstrate the usage of these words.

1. Sadr (breast) is the repository of love and humility. “He must purge his breast (sadr), which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement.”²¹
2. Qalb (heart) is the treasure of faith and the light that illuminates our power of understanding. “[A true seeker]... must, before all else, cleanse his heart (qalb), which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge”²² and “..yet, alas, there is no ear to hear, nor heart (qalb) to understand.”²³
3. Shaghaf is a profound love for humanity, and the extent of human love cannot surpass shaghaf.
4. Fu’ad is the inner capacity of the heart to experience and perceive truth. In the Qur’án it is stated that: “His heart (fu’ad) falsified not what he saw”²⁴ –a spiritual phenomenon that is also repeatedly described in the Bahá’í writings. The word “fu’ad” has frequently been translated as “conscience”, which naturally cannot encompass the full meaning of the term. It can also be interpreted as the level of understanding and as inner vision.
5. Hubbat al-Qulúb (‘the love of the heart’) is the capacity of the heart to be the repository of love for God. In this condition, the heart has no space for anything other than God. “Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty.”²⁵
6. Suwaidá’ literally means ‘the black part of a gazelle’s eye’. In oriental literature this is regarded as the epitome of beauty.

Suwaidá' is the ability of the heart to unravel divine mysteries and to embody the precious qualities of wisdom and understanding. This ability is referred to in the Qur'án, in the passage "[...] and He taught Adam the names of all things [...]"²⁶ Such a (cleansed) heart can unravel mysteries which even the angels are not capable of comprehending. This reminds us of the afore-mentioned words of Bahá'u'lláh in the Book of Certitude, whereby a true seeker must, "before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge."

7. Mahjat al-Qulúb is the level of the heart at which the revelation of divine attributes is granted to humans (or, rather, to the prophets). Thus, the Qur'án states: "and truly, we honoured the children of Adam and carried them over land and sea and provided them with good things and favoured them [...]"²⁷

4.5 The mystical concepts in the first passage of *The Hidden Words*

4.5.1 Basic principles

Before examining in detail the mystic meaning of the specific terms which occur, we should first take note of two important principles that will enhance our understanding of the symbolic language used:

- As Bahá'u'lláh explains in *The Seven Valleys*^{*} each word in each plane has a different meaning. Thus, in the world of revelation, the heavenly realm (*malakút*), for example, the

^{*} "However, on every plane, to every letter a meaning is allotted which relateth to that plane. Indeed, the wayfarer findeth a secret in every name, a mystery in every letter." (p. 42).

words “nightingale” or “dove” can be a symbol for the Manifestation Himself; in the world of creation, on the other hand, it can be a symbol for the human soul (*nafs*) or an allusion to the human heart as, for example, in the long obligatory prayer.*

- Hence, it follows that the meaning of a word or verse cannot be taken as always relating to a particular, fixed content. Often a word, symbol or verse can have several spiritual meanings. This is made clear, for example, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of the symbols of Adam, Eve, the serpent etc. in *Some Answered Questions* (p.121 ff). Furthermore, in His *Kitab-i-Íqán*, the *Book of Certitude* (283), Bahá'u'lláh mentions and confirms the Islamic tradition according to which every word has seventy meanings. Human comprehension can embrace only one of these meanings (ibid.). When we accept this we realise that our interpretation of spiritual concepts can never be considered the only valid or the definitive explanation.

4.5.2 Nightingale and Phoenix -the symbolism of the various birds in the Persian *Hidden Words*

In the *Hidden Words*²⁸ we find several symbols referring to birds: the nightingale, the hoopoe, the phoenix, the dove, the owl and “bird”/”birds” are used as general metaphors.

One example is the symbol of the dove: in no. 13 Bahá'u'lláh says:

“O My children! I fear lest, bereft of the melody of the dove of heaven, ye will sink back to the shades of utter loss [...]” In this case, the “dove of heaven” indubitably refers to Bahá'u'lláh Himself.²⁹

* “Too high art Thou [...] for the birds of the hearts of them who are devoted to Thee to attain to the door of Thy gate.” (*Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 320)

Another related example is the symbol of the “nightingale”. In the *Book of Certitude (Kitáb-i-Íqán)* Bahá’u’lláh alludes unambiguously to His rank as Manifestation of God when He says:

[...] the portals of the Ridván cannot for ever remain open. The day 24 will surely come when the Nightingale of Paradise will have winged its flight away from its earthly abode unto its heavenly nest. Then will its melody be heard no more, and the beauty of the rose cease to shine.³⁰

The same expression “nightingale” can also be found –as will be familiar to most readers– in two passages in the “Tablet of Ahmad”: “*Lo, the Nightingale of Paradise singeth on the twigs of the Tree of Eternity with holy and sweet melodies [...]*” and “*[...] so the Nightingale raises its summons to you from this prison [...]*”³¹ with unmistakable reference to Bahá’u’lláh Himself.

Interestingly, on these two occasions Shoghi Effendi renders the original term *varqá* (dove) as “nightingale”. This can be regarded as an indication that both symbols, the dove and the nightingale, largely embrace the same content.* As if to prove

* The nightingale as a symbol of beauty, whose song evokes yearning and heartache (on account of the remoteness of the object of longing), is likely to be more familiar to Western readers –which is probably why Shoghi Effendi chose to use this symbol.

In oriental mysticism we encounter the dove as a symbol at the latest in the writings of Saná’í (died ca. 1131). The sound of its cooing, its call, is heard as *ku, ku...?* “*Where, where...?*”, as the call of the soul for its beloved in yearning for its true homeland, for its “most exalted home”, its “eternal nest” (cf. the long obligatory prayer and *Hidden Words*, Persian no. 4). However, it also acts as the conveyor of a message of affection or the bringer of a long-awaited piece of news –poetically concealed in the form of a letter from the beloved. The motif of the anxiously awaited letter and the reprimanding of a friend who has failed to write is frequently found in oriental literature as an allegory (expressing the hope of receiving divine mercy and of reunion with God), particularly in Sufi literature. It is noteworthy that in the introductory passage of His letter *The Four Valleys* Bahá’u’lláh provides a consummate example of the use of this stylistic device.

Thus, on this plane of meaning, the symbol of the dove (*hamama* or, less frequently, *varqá*) as the conveyor of the message ingeniously merges with that of
../..

this point, Bahá'u'lláh continues the passage in the *Book of Certitude* cited above with the words:

Seize the time, therefore, ere the glory of the divine springtime hath spent itself, and the Bird of Eternity ceased to warble its melody, that thy inner hearing may not be deprived of hearkening unto its call.*

Of greater relevance with regard to the first Hidden Word are, however, passages in Bahá'u'lláh's writings such as:

It (the dayspring of Revelation, i.e. the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh) teacheth lamentation and moaning to the nightingales warbling upon the bough of remoteness and bereavement, instructeth them in the art of love's ways, and showeth them the secret of heart-surrender.†

Here the individual souls are addressed as spiritual birds who are exhorted to take flight on the wings of longing.‡ Hence, if we consider the symbol of the bird in the first of the Persian *Hidden Words*, it is possible to say that the Manifestations of God use this to refer to human beings, to their souls and hearts, with the intention of showing them their spiritual destiny and encouraging them to strive towards this goal “with the wings of the soul”. The

the nightingale (*andalib* or *bulbul*) as the one who presents it, so as to create a *single* symbol representing the prophet of God.

* *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 23; emphasis added, D.M.; cf. also para.111, where Bahá'u'lláh refers to Muhammad as the “Dove of Eternity”, as well as paragraphs 16 and 283, where the terms “Birds of Heaven” and “Doves of Eternity” are applied to all prophets.

† *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 23; emphasis added, D.M.; This passage is itself full of mystic allusions and meanings.

‡ Cf. also the prayer by Bahá'u'lláh in which he calls upon God, saying, “*Wilt Thou not behold, O my Master, the hearts wherein have beaten the wings of the dove of longing and love for Thee?*” (Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah, p. 335)

terms “mystic nightingale”, “messenger of the Solomon of love” and “immortal Phoenix”, which appear in that order in the first of the *Hidden Words*, refer to the reality of man or rather the reality of the soul.

Incidentally, this is also the case where the symbol of the bird does not stand for positive characteristics and conditions, as for example in no.75:

“O children of negligence! [...] Ye are even as the unwary bird that with full confidence warbleth upon the bough...”

Thus, on the one hand, all the invocations in the first passage of the *Hidden Words* clearly seem to be addressed to the individual soul. On the other hand, we must also not lose sight of the fact that the articulated word of God has validity in all worlds and on all planes of existence. With this in mind, it can be assumed that this call is directed at the whole of creation. Hence, all created beings are exhorted to rise up and strive towards their predestined goal. In the heavenly realm this applies to the Manifestations of God, who must fulfil their divine mission in the world despite the suffering and oppression they endure, while in this world it also applies to humans, who are called upon to walk the path of detachment.

4.5.3 The “messenger of the Solomon of love”

The word “messenger” is an interpretation, rather than a direct translation, of the original term “*hudhud*” (hoopoe). Shoghi Effendi puts the general sense of the invocation across by using the phrase “*O messenger of the Solomon of love!*”

The stories recorded in the Old Testament and the Qur’án tell of the love between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. There the hoopoe bird functions as a messenger who conveys the

love letters from Solomon to the Queen of Sheba. Similarly, in Attar's* well-known mystic story, *Mantiqu't-tair* ("Conference of the Birds")† the hoopoe leads a flock of birds that set forth in search of their true king.‡ In these stories the hoopoe functions primarily as a conveyor of the message of love and of the yearning of the human heart, but at the same time it also holds the rank of a teacher or guide.

To summarise, in this first passage Bahá'u'lláh compares the human soul with the bird whose duty it is to bring the message of love to the beloved, here portrayed as the Queen of Sheba. By using the three mystical symbols of Solomon, the hoopoe bird (Hudhud) and the Queen of Sheba, Bahá'u'lláh reminds the people of the world of one of the most beautiful and profound love stories:

O messenger of the Solomon of love! Seek thou no shelter except in the Sheba of the well-beloved, and O immortal phoenix! dwell not save on the mount of faithfulness. Therein is thy habitation, if on the wings of thy soul thou soarest to the realm of the infinite and seekest to attain thy goal.

4.5.4 The "Sheba of the well-beloved"

Sheba is a region in the south east of what is now Yemen. The famous queen of Sheba, Bilqís, was renowned for her beauty. The love story recounted in the Torah and in the Qur'án about

* Along with Rumi and Saná'í, Shaykh Farídu'd-Dín 'Attár (1150-1228), a famous Persian mystic, is one of the three best-known poets from the golden age of oriental mysticism. In his mystical writings, Bahá'u'lláh quotes from the works of all three.

† For an English translation see Farid al-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, translated with an introduction by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, Penguin Classics, 1984

‡ See also the following explanations concerning the "Phoenix" and the "Mount of Faithfulness".

King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, with the bird acting as the carrier of love letters from one to the other, came to be an almost archetypal symbol of romantic love in oriental literature. Sheba symbolised the homeland of the beloved and Hudhud, the hoopoe, was an allusion to the love relationship.

Bahá'u'lláh's brave young courier, Badí' ('the Wonderful'), who carried the Tablet written by his best-beloved to Shah Násiri'd-Dín and suffered martyrdom as a result, referred to this very symbol when delivering the Tablet to the king. His words have been reported as: "O King! I have come to thee from Sheba with a weighty message". Thus he ensured that the story of Solomon, Sheba and Hudhud will be remembered for thousands of years to come.

4.5.5. The (immortal) phoenix

The phoenix, known in Persian as *simurgh*, is a symbol that is used in the mystic literature of many nations to refer to the various spiritual planes. The term has been used by many oriental mystics as an allusion to an angelic spiritual guide that helps the seeker to attain his goal.

An even more widespread image is that of the phoenix as an invisible, immortal giant bird, which has its nest on the peak of a towering, insurmountable mountain called *Qaf*, whence its celestial melodies awaken those who are asleep on the bed of heedlessness.

The phoenix, known in Arabic as "*angha*" is, however, also employed to symbolise the immortality of the human spirit, which is awakened to new life after death. Other birds in oriental literature also have the same symbolic content. The famous philosopher, physician and universal scholar Ibn Siná (Avicenna),

for example, used the dove (*varqá'*) as a symbol of the human spirit.*

In Attar's "*Conference of the Birds*" a flock of birds, guided by the hoopoe, sets out on an adventurous journey to the land of the mystical king of the birds, Simurgh ("*anghá'*" or phoenix), on the top of Mount *Qaf*. Beset with numerous trials and tribulations, more and more birds gradually drop out and are unable to accomplish their undertaking. Towards the end of the journey, after passing through all seven valleys[†] and overcoming all obstacles, the remaining birds have become completely united and selfless. Having reached the station of unity and selflessness, the remaining birds are addressed on the mountain top by the hoopoe, who says: "There are thirty of us that have reached this peak in complete unity. There is in reality no Simurgh (phoenix); we, thirty birds (*sí murgh*) have, through our deeds, been elevated to the rank of Simurgh."[‡]

For one thing, Attar takes this mythical story as an opportunity to explain the importance of unity and the relinquishing of the ego; at the same time, he wishes to make it clear that the phoenix is not a real creature, but in this story merely symbolises the highest spiritual station.

* See the preface to ,Attár's *Mantiqu't-tair* written by Ahmand Khoshnevi, Ta'id Publications, Isfahán, undated.

† In answer to questions posed by Shaykh Muhyi'd-Din Karkuki, a great master of the mystical Khalidiyyah order, Bahá'u'lláh revealed the book *The Seven Valleys*. In this work he described the path of the seeker through the seven valleys, from the valley of search to that of complete surrender to the will of God. The names and the sequence of the seven stages are almost identical with those described by Attar. Cf. *The Seven Valleys*, p. 6

‡ When used as a name, Simurgh alludes to the Persian words for "thirty" and "bird", thereby symbolising the ultimate knowledge of one's true self through complete detachment and genuine unity.

4.5.6. Phoenix / Simurgh/ ‘Anghá’ in the Bahá’í Writings

The word *simurgh*, (Arabic ‘*anghá*’; phoenix) occurs frequently in the Bahá’í writings. Wherever it appears, it is obvious that the term is being used exclusively by virtue of its symbolic and mystic content.

In a Tablet to a believer who had devoted himself to the study of alchemy, Bahá’u’lláh advises him first to consider carefully whether the object of this (at that time evidently) highly respected science³² really existed or whether it were not simply an abstract name like *simurgh*.³³

In another Tablet³⁴ Bahá’u’lláh describes the high station of martyrdom and declares that the time for martyrdom has long passed and that martyrs only exist at the command of God for the sake of the life of the world and for the revelation of new sciences and arts. The sublime station of martyrdom, he wrote, was like the existence of the ‘*anghá*’.

Shoghi Effendi translated the term ‘*anghá-i-baqá*’ with “immortal phoenix”. In the light of the foregoing elucidations, the real meaning of the word “phoenix” becomes clear: it is the lofty station of true humanity, the sole aim of which is to attain the summit of the “mount of faithfulness”. On the other hand, in constantly rising again from its own ashes, the phoenix is also a symbol of eternal life and resurrection to a new life. This image reflects the continued life of the soul after death and the possibility of advancing through all the worlds of God, assuming the appropriate form in each world.

4.5.7 “The mount of faithfulness”(Kúh-i-Qáf)

4.5.7.1 Occurrence of this term in the Baha’i writings

In a letter to the Bahá’í community in Badkubih* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that Mount *Qáf*, which is mentioned in old sagas and traditions, referred to Mount *Qáfqaz* (the Caucasus)†. The Persians, he says, had believed the nest of the phoenix to be located there. Therefore there was hope that God’s new faith would gain a foothold in the Caucasus region and build its nest there.³⁵ In another Tablet³⁶ he expresses the hope that the efforts of the friends might prove the Caucasus region to be the seat of the divine phoenix of the East and that its splendour would illuminate that vast area.

Shoghi Effendi translated the mystical phrase “*Qáf-i-Vafá*” as “mount of faithfulness”. As already mentioned, the summit of this mountain is very difficult to reach and at its very top is the phoenix’s nest. When taken as a figurative image referring to spirituality, this can be interpreted as meaning that attaining the highest level of spiritual development is just as difficult as climbing Mount *Qáf*.

Faithfulness is one of the most difficult human virtues to achieve. It constitutes the basis of God’s covenant with man. This most exacting quality is also referred to in such expressions as “hill of faithfulness” and “emerald height of fidelity” in no. 77 of the Persian *Hidden Words*. The peak which is so difficult to reach is therefore nothing other than the characteristic of faithfulness to

* Badkubih is a town in the Caucasus. During ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s lifetime there was an active Bahá’í community there.

† In Persian the name Caucasus, *Qáfqaz*, begins with the letter *qáf*. The legendary mountain on whose summit the phoenix lives also has the name “*Qáf*”. Referring to certain places, regions or situations, whether real or mythical, by the first letter of their name is a characteristic feature of traditional Persian poetry and literature. Bahá’u’lláh, for instance, uses the phrase “the land of Tá” for Tehran and “the land of Khá” for Khorasan etc.

God's covenant. Viewed in this way, the translation of the term "*Qáf-i-Vafá*" as "mount of faithfulness", which is otherwise unclear for a western reader, is a masterly literary accomplishment.

4.5.8 The "Blessed Beauty" and the "Phoenix of Mount Qáf"

It is reported that Bahá'u'lláh sometimes spent the hot summers in the mountainous countryside north of Tehran. One of these places is called "Murgh Mahallih" ('chicken region'). In a letter to Mr. Báshiriláhi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that the improvement in the climate of the Murgh Mahallih region was a sign of God's mercy. That place, he continues, is not an area for chickens but rather the nest of the immortal phoenix, the phoenix of the mount of faithfulness (*Kúh-i-Qáf*), for Bahá'u'lláh had stayed there one summer.³⁷

4.5.9 The "mount of faithfulness" in mystical literature

Experts on oriental mysticism know that in mystical language a word, concept or thing can have different interpretations or meanings depending on the circumstances. The same applies to many terms in the holy scriptures, as can be deduced from the many various explanations which Bahá'u'lláh has given in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* for concepts such as "sun", "moon", "clouds", "heaven" etc. The following examples demonstrate a few symbolic interpretations of the term *Kúh-i-Qáf* which are not mentioned in Bahá'í literature. In the entry under the key-word "qáf" in volume 6 of the Mu'in encyclopedia, we read that:

1. *Qáf* is a mountain shrouded in legend, whose name is mentioned in the *Qur'án*. The interpreters of the *Qur'án* believe it to

be a range of mountains extending all around the earth; it is of emerald colour^{*} and is the origin of all mountains.

2. Some people believe that this term refers to the Elburz Mountains and that innumerable creatures of God are hidden beyond this mountain. Others are of the opinion that Mount Qáf means the Caucasus.
3. Mystic writers have suggested that Mount Qáf is in fact a symbol for the human heart. The seeker who wishes to walk the path of detachment will, as soon as he takes one step outside the realm of the heart, be stopped and asked: “*Where do you wish to go? We are with you, stay here and go no further!*” It is said that God has concealed all his mysteries in human hearts. Man need not seek anywhere else. (cf. Arabic *Hidden Words* no. 11: “[...] *I have created thee rich [...]*” or no.12: “[...] *Be thou content with it and seek naught else [...]*”

* This partly coincides with Bahá'u'lláh's reference in no. 77 of the *Hidden Words* to the hill of faithfulness as the “emerald heights of fidelity”. Accordingly, Shoghi Effendi translates Mount Qáf as “mount of faithfulness”. In the literature of the mystics, the same colour is attributed to both.