

Catastrophe, Armageddon and Millennium: some aspects of the Bábí–Bahá’í exegesis of apocalyptic symbolism

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Abstract

A wide range of sometimes disturbing Abrahamic and related religious texts and traditions have warned humankind of an impending eschatological calamity or catastrophe. Additionally the sacred books of the world not only predict global catastrophe but also an ensuing millennial world peace. This paper is a preliminary consideration of selected Bábí–Bahá’í doctrines expository of apocalyptic symbolism associated with major Abrahamic religious prophecies. I will endeavour to show that many of the Bahá’í interpretations of end-time catastrophe are best viewed in their evolving historical contexts.

A brief consideration will be made of the war of the last days referred to in the canonical Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, as the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:14). A cursory examination of dimensions of the catastrophe and ensuing millennial peace by the central figures of the Bahá’í religion will be set down. For several decades, some Bahá’ís have been troubled by expectations of concrete global catastrophe. Awareness of the fact that Bábí–Bahá’í sources anticipate numerous “catastrophes” with aspects that have already been outwardly realised or spiritually interpreted is not widespread in the contemporary Bahá’í community. On occasion, both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh undertook a courageous demythologization of apocalyptic scenarios anticipated in Biblical and Islamic scripture and tradition. It is the Bahá’í belief that the “catastrophe” or the apocalyptic upheaval of the last days has very largely if not completely been realised in the troubled yet brilliant 20th century.

The catastrophe

The sacred books of the world predict both global catastrophe and world peace. Bahá’í scripture anticipates, extends, and interprets such prophecies; sometimes literally, sometimes spiritually, and occasionally in both these ways. These writings speak about an imminent catastrophic calamity or “apocalyptic upheaval.” They predict the subsequent appearance of universal peace; an imminent secular “lesser peace” (*sul al-akbar*; lit., “greater peace”)

and a future a spiritual world order of Bahá'u'lláh, the “most great peace” (*sul al-a'am*).

In the Bahá'í view, the coming of peace will be gradual, and to some extent realised in the 20th century. In the light of the Bahá'í teachings it is possible to argue convincingly that with the end of the cold war and the increasing trend towards disarmament, international co-operation, and globalization that the “lesser peace” has all but been realised. Yet this secular, politically oriented “lesser peace” is not comparable to that peace which is spiritually rooted; the future truly millennial peace which is more than a virtual cessation of many intractable global conflicts. Realistic about the establishment of global, political peace, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá predicted multi-national disarmament. The *Montreal Star* of 11 September 1912 reported that he had stated that nations would be *forced* into peace in the 20th century. Humanity would sicken over the cost of warmongering.¹ Prior to the unfoldment of that secular disarmament which is the “lesser peace,” varieties of “calamity” or “catastrophe” are clearly anticipated in Bábí-Bahá'í scripture. It is clear, however, that Bahá'í scripture does not expect or support a literal apocalyptic collapse of the cosmos or an absolute “end of the world.”² Scriptural writings that appear to suggest this possibility are not interpreted literally.

It is the Bahá'í position that the appearance of a new religion is itself a revolutionary, a “catastrophic” religio-political event; a “Day of the Lord” and “Day of Judgement” which causes the “limbs of mankind to quake.”³ It precipitates inner and ultimately outer change; an end to existing “global disorder” through the appearance, in the language of the apocalypse, of “a new heaven and a new earth.” The advent of a new religion involves new, revolutionary ways of thought and action. The religion which culminates in “peace” comes also as a civilization changing “sword,” “woe” or “catastrophe.”⁴

The nature of the diverse eschatological catastrophes predicted in the sacred books of the world are too numerous and complex to be detailed here; including, for example, the disruption of the cosmos, earthquakes, eclipses, wars, famine, and pestilence, and so on. Neither can their multi-faceted Bábí-Bahá'í interpretations be set down in detail. The following few notes attempt

¹ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *‘Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada* (Montreal: NSA of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1962) 34–35.

² Cf. Letter of Shoghi Effendi dated July 5 1947 cited in H. Hornby (comp.) *Lights of Guidance* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 3rd ed., 1994) Para. 437.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Ishrqt in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 58/ trans. 118.

⁴ In explaining the words “the second woe is past; and behold the third woe cometh quickly” (Rev. 11:14), ‘Abdu'l-Bahá cited Ezekiel 2:3 and reckoned as “woes” the three successive religions of Muhammad (Islam), the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh (see *Some Answered Questions* [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981] chapter XI on Rev 11:14).

to summarise some key Abrahamic religious predictions of eschatological
“catastrophe.”

Hebrew Bible and the New Testament

An apocalyptic “end” or cosmic catastrophe is predicted or presupposed in numerous texts within the Hebrew Bible. It is one of the senses of the (eschatological) expression “Day of the Lord [YHWH = Yahweh].” The prophet Zephaniah (fl. late 7th cent. BCE) boldly proclaimed that YHWH would destroy “all the inhabitants of the earth” on the “Day of his wrath” (see Zeph 1:7ff). Isaiah had it that the whole world would be punished for its evil on the “Day of the Lord” (Isa. 13:6f). A horrendous catastrophe is envisaged in Zech 13:8-9 which reads,

In the whole land, says the Lord, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, “They are my people”; and I will say, “The Lord is my God.”⁵

According to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “What will be the sign of your [Jesus’] coming and of the *end of the world*.”⁶ The Greek here was only loosely and inadequately translated in the authorised version as “the end of the world.” More recent Christian translations such as the revised standard version have “close [completion] of the age” or something similar. This is not to say, however, that a multitude of apocalyptic predictions presupposing a collapse of the cosmos and an end to existing civilization do not exist in the New Testament (e.g. in the *Apocalypse*) and elsewhere in the Bible. These predictions are generally understood by Bahá’ís to refer to the “end” (=completion) or fulfilment of an era or religious cycle.

Such apocalyptic events as the darkening of the “sun” and the “moon” (Mk. 13:24b=Matt 24:29; cf. Lk. 21:25), the qur’anic reference to the “conjoining of the sun and the moon” (Q. 75:9) or according to Islamic traditions “the rising of the sun in the west” are not interpreted wholly literally in Bábí-Bahá’í scriptural texts. The apocalyptic implications of such words of Jesus as “heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away” (Mk. 13:31 = Matt. 24:35 = Lk. 21:33) are likewise not interpreted literally in Bahá’í sacred writings.

⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is reported to have interpreted this text referring to the fact that a “great disturbance,” a “great catastrophe” or terrible “calamity” will happen in the world after the 1335 day [=year] period referred to in Daniel 12:12 have passed (cf. Ruth White, *‘Abdu’l-Baha and the Promised Age* [J. J. Little and Ives 1927] 174-5).

⁶ Authorised Version [=King James version]; Gk. = *sunteleias tou aionos*, Matt 24:3 + synoptic parallels.

Qur'án & adíth

The central importance of Muslim belief in the twin concepts of “God and the Last Day” (*Allh wa'-l yawm al-khír[ah]*) is constantly enunciated (20+ times) in the Qur'án.⁷ There are several references to an eschatological “calamity” in this holy book (revealed piecemeal between c. 610 and 632 CE). One of the brief (11 verse) Meccan sras (Q. 101 cf. 13:31; 69:4) is entitled *al-Qr'ia*, which has been variously translated, “the striking” (Sale); “the smiting” (Rodwell); “the calamity” (Pickthall) and “the clatterer” (Arberry); the word has connotations of “sudden misfortune” and eschatological judgement.⁸ In the Qur'anic “Sra of the Resurrection” (*al-qiyma*; 75:24-5) we read, “Upon that day faces shall be radiant gazing upon their Lord; and upon that day faces shall be scowling, thou mightest think the Calamity (*fqirah*) has been wreaked on them.”⁹ Another verse contains an important reference to the *mmah* or “great catastrophe” as Arberry rendered it,

Then, when the Great Catastrophe (*mmah*) comes upon that day
when man shall remember what he has striven... (79:34)¹⁰

Both Sunní and Shí'í sources contain material bearing upon end-time catastrophe. In Muhammad Báqir Majlísí's *Biar al-anwr* (“Seas of Lights”; a massive Shí'í encyclopaedia quoted quite frequently by both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh) there exists a section based upon texts of the Qur'án, commentary and various traditions of the Twelver Imáms entitled, “The blowing into the Trumpet and the destruction of the world (*fan' al-duny*) (cf. Q. 55:26 below) and that every soul shall taste death.”¹¹

The theme of the “destruction of the world” (*fan' al-duny*) is closely related to the exegesis of Qur'án 55:26:

All that dwells on earth shall perish (*fní* cf. *faná'*), yet still abides
(*yabqa*) the Face of thy Lord (*wajh rabbika*), possessed of
Majesty and Glory (*dhu'l-jall wa'l-ikrm*).

⁷ See Hanna Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), 130ff.

⁸ Ian Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1992) 203.

⁹ Trans. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1983) 619.

¹⁰ In due course we shall see that certain of Bahá'u'lláh's references to the “catastrophe” utilise this Qur'anic *hapax legomenon* (unique term).

¹¹ *dhá'iq al-mawt* Q. x 3 = 3:185[2]; 21:35[36]; 29:57.

Bahá'í interpretations

Biblical and Qur'anic (Arabic) "catastrophe" terminology is utilised, extended, and interpreted in Bábí-Bahá'í scripture. As I will show interpretations offered in Bahá'í texts include the conference of Badasht, the religion of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers of his time, and the two world wars of the 20th century.

The "catastrophe" predicted in the "Sra of the Terror" (Q. 56) and elsewhere, for example, was understood to be the revolutionary 1848 Bábí conference of Badasht at which the Báb's claim to be the promised Qá'im was announced and the Islámic law formally abrogated. This was tantamount to an apocalyptic "catastrophe." 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his *Memorials of the Faithful* mentions Bahá'u'lláh's suggestion that the Sra *al-wqi'ah* ("the Terror", "Inevitable") be read at this time.¹² This srah begins,

When *al-wqi'ah* ("the Terror") descends... abasing, exalting,
when the earth shall be rocked and the mountains crumbled, and
become a dust scattered, and you shall be in three bands –
Companions of the Right (O Companions of the Right!),
Companions of the Left (O Companions of the Left!) and the
Outstrippers (*sbiqn*) those are they brought nigh the Throne, in
the Gardens of Delight. (Q. 56, trans. Arberry)

Shoghi Effendi wrote in *God Passes By*, "On that memorable day the 'Bugle' mentioned in the Qur'án was sounded (*nuqrih- ' nqr*), the 'stunning trumpet blast' was loudly raised (*nafkhih- ' r*), and the 'Catastrophe' (*mmih- ' kubr*) came to pass."¹³

In his *Law-i Ishrqt*, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the Báb as "the Harbinger of His Great Revelation which hath caused the limbs of all mankind (*faqr' al-umam*) to quake."¹⁴ The religion of the Báb was a revolutionary phenomenon; a kind of "catastrophe" preparatory to the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith. A cursory examination of the brief but turbulent history of the Bábí religion bears this out.

There are many texts within the writings of the central figures of the Bahá'í religion and its authoritative and secondary interpreters that in one way or another bear upon 19th and 20th century "catastrophe[s]." The relevant passages are best viewed chronologically and in historical context – a task that

¹² *Memorials of the Faithful* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975) 201.

¹³ *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) p. 33; Per. trans. *Mavaddat*, p. 96.

¹⁴ R-'-D VII = "tremble!"; *Majm'a az alw-i jaml-i aqdas-i abh'* (Cairo: 1338/ [1919-] 1920, rep. Wilmette, 137BE/1980) 580; *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 102.

can only be summarily attempted or sketched here.

The writings of Bahá'u'lláh

A fairly large number of Bahá'u'lláh's writings bear directly or indirectly upon the theme of latter-day "catastrophe". It is stated that various of his revelatory "Tablets" (*alw*) as expressions of the creative Word are tantamount encapsulations of end-time, catastrophic "trumpet blasts" precipitating revolutionary "terror" and calamitous change. Certain of his major *Tablets to the Kings*, for example, were accorded suggestive qur'anic rooted titles by Bahá'u'lláh himself. In a Tablet to Nabíl [-i Zarandi?], which at one point dwells on the theme of his revelations in the light of end-time "judgement" or "catastrophe", he states that,

Each one of them [the "Tablets to the Kings"] hath been designated by a special name. The first hath been named "The Rumbling [Shout]" [*al-aya*, Q. 54:31... etc], the second "The [Catastrophic] Blow" [*al-Qri'a*, Q. 101] the third "The Inevitable [Calamity]" [*al-qqah*, Q. 69], the fourth, "The Plain" [*al-Shirah*, Q. 79:14], the fifth "The Catastrophe" [*al-mmah*, Q. 79:34] and the others, "The Stunning Trumpet Blast," [*al-khkhhah*, Q. 80:33] "The Near Event," [*al-zulfah*, Q. 67:27] "The Great Terror," [*al-faza' al-akbar*, Q. 21:103] "The Trumpet," [*al-r*, Q. 6:73...] "The Bugle," [*al-Nqr*, Q. 74:8] and their like...¹⁵

It is of particular interest to note that Bahá'u'lláh, alluding to Q. 79:34 in various of his writings of the late 'Akká period cites an earlier (c. 1869/70?) tablet – dating to around the time of the universal proclamation to the kings and rulers of the earth – containing "perspicuous verses"¹⁶ in which the following line is contained:

Hath the Catastrophe (*mmah*) come to pass? Say: Yea, by the

¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtidrt va chand law-i dígr* (n.p. [Bombay] 1310/1892-3) 298, trans. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 46, cf. *God Passes By* 212 + Per. trans. *Mavaddat* 425). I have supplied the transliteration and the qur'anic references. Compare with the tablets as arranged by Bahá'u'lláh in his *rat al-haykal*, (1) Tablet to the Pope [Pius IX]; 2) Tablet to Napoleon III [2nd Tablet]; 3) = Tablet to the Czar of Russia; 4) = Tablet to Queen Victoria; 5) Tablet to Náir al-Dín Sháh; 6) Srat al-Rá'is, etc. Later in this same tablet, Bahá'u'lláh addresses Nabíl informing him that it is his eschatological "Announcement (al-nidá)" which has caused the heavens to be "cleft asunder", the "mountains" crushed to dust and the "Great Terror" (*al-faza' al-akbar*, Q. 21:103) been made manifest (see *Iqtidarat* 300).

¹⁶ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 117-119, and *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) 131-4.

Lord of Lords!¹⁷

It is indicated in Bábí-Bahá'í scripture that at the moment just prior to the declaration of the Manifestation of God when none have yet grasped his purpose or come to faith, purposeful “creation” ceases to be; all but his Being, “the Face of God” are annihilated. There follows mystic “recreation” through the Divine Grace and through the assent to faith of his disciples and followers.¹⁸

In this connection it is also worth noting that Bahá'u'lláh specifically stated that power had been taken from “two ranks amongst men: kings and ecclesiastics”,¹⁹ both secular and religious sources of authority. In *The Promised Day is Come* (1941), Shoghi Effendi reckoned the century from the 1840s towards the 1940s was “one of the most *cataclysmic* periods in the annals of mankind” as far as the “fortunes of royalty are concerned.”²⁰

As early as 1858 in his 63rd Persian Hidden Word – the only one specifically addressed to the “peoples of the [earth] world” [*big'ay ahl-i ar*] – Bahá'u'lláh refers to an “unforseen” (*n-gahní* = “suddenly”; “unexpectedly”; “unawares”) “calamity” (*bal[']*=“trial”; “tribulation”) and an “grievous retribution” (*'iqb-i 'aimí* =[infliction of punishment]) awaiting humankind on account of its misdeeds.

In a well-known extract from a Persian tablet of Bahá'u'lláh to Muhammad Ibrahím Khalíl-i Qazvíní dating to around 1878 CE²¹ it is stated that,

The world is in travail (*munqalab* = lit. “turned upside down”) and its agitation (*inqilb*= lit. “overthrow”, “alteration”) waxeth day by day. Its face is turned toward waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs (lit. “flanks of the body”) of mankind (*faqr' al-'lam*) to quake (“tremble”). Then, and only then, will the [Divine] Standard be unfurled (lit. “the signs, banners [*al-a'lm*] be lifted up”), and the Nightingale of Paradise (lit. *'andil* =

¹⁷ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 67; see Qur'án 79:34 above.

¹⁸ See Arabic and Persian Bayans on “death” and “resurrection.”

¹⁹ Cited in *Promised Day* 20.

²⁰ *Promised Day* 49. My emphasis.

²¹ Shawwál 1925 AH; see *Bahá'í World* (Haifa, Bahá'í World Centre, 1920) 1:37; = AQA 1:21-2, trans. *Gleanings* LXI:118.

“nightingales”) warble its melody.²²

In the *Advent of Divine Justice* (1939)²³ and at the beginning of *The Promised Day is Come* (1941)²⁴ and elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi cites various apocalyptic prophecies from miscellaneous tablets of Bahá'u'lláh;

The time for the destruction of the world and its people hath arrived (*hangm fan 'yi 'lam va ahl-i n rasíd amad*).

The hour is approaching when the most great convulsion (*inqilb-i akbar*) will have appeared.

Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.

By Myself! The day is approaching when We will have rolled up the world and all that is therein, and spread out a new Order in its stead.

The day is approaching when its [civilization's] flame (*nr*) will devour the cities, when the tongue of Grandeur will proclaim: “The Kingdom is God's, the Almighty, the All-Praised (*al-mulk li-llhí al-ái al-amíd*).”²⁵

Such passages could be greatly multiplied. Among other things, as we shall see, Bahá'is believe that these texts prophesy the wars of the 20th century and beyond as well as possible apocalyptic upheavals. At this point some further Bahá'í interpretation[s] of “catastrophe” and of the “battle of Armageddon” can be sketched.

The battle of Armageddon

One of the expressions indicative of end-time “catastrophe” as final conflagration, unique to the New Testament Book of Revelation, is the battle “at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon” (Rev. 16:16) which is a “battle of the great day of God, the Almighty” (16:14). The loose, conflated English transliteration of the Greek [*h*]ar'-mageden, “Armageddon” (so AV

²² *Gleanings* 83/tr.118.

²³ *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 68.

²⁴ *Promised Day* 2f., 17.

²⁵ *Advent* 166 and *Promised Day* 3; *ibid.*; *Promised Day* 17; *ibid.*; *Advent* 68.

[KJV]) is most probably correctly read as *Har-magedon* (NRSV; cf. the ancient mss. readings), the place-name of the final eschatological conflict. In "Hebrew" this signifies (an unknown) "mountain of Megiddo" (cf. LXX Zech 12:11 = *Ma[e]geddo*). Megiddo is, in fact, the name of an ancient city (ruined since the 4th Cent. BCE). It is now but a 70 foot mound (hardly a mountain) known in Arabic as *Tell el-Mutesellim* ("the Tell of the Governor") located 60 miles north of Jerusalem in the western section of the Jezreel (= Gk. Esdraelon) valley; more or less at the foot of or just 7 miles from the southern end of Mt. Carmel.

Armageddon, understood as "Mount Megiddo," is now not infrequently identified with Mount Carmel. E. Lohmeyer (d. 1946, a German commentator on the apocalypse), for example, reckoned that Armageddon (= Har-magedon) should be translated "Megiddo range" and signify Mt. Carmel.²⁶ Many others have thought similarly though it should be admitted that the philological sense and geographical meaning of Armageddon remains something of a mystery. The Biblical mention of Megiddo very likely indicates something geographically near Mount Carmel.²⁷

Having brilliantly and succinctly reviewed the complicated theories of the past, Jon Paulien writes in the 1990 *Anchor Bible Dictionary* entry "Armageddon" that none of the many theories "preclude the possibility that the author of Revelation saw elements of the ideological battle on Mount Carmel as decisive in the final battle between good and evil."²⁸ He further writes, "while Megiddo was not a mountain, it wasn't a valley either – it was located on an elevation overlooking the Plain of Jezreel... Since the city was located at the foot of the Carmel range, 'mountain if Megiddo' could easily be a reference to Mount Carmel (1Kgs. 18:19, 20; 2Kgs. 2:25; 4:25). It was on Mount Carmel that fire was called down to prove that Yahweh was the true God (cf. Rev. 13:13,14). It was there that the false prophets were defeated (cf. Rev. 16:13-16)..."²⁹

It is also fascinating to note that one of the Qumran texts ("Dead Sea Scrolls"), part of a fragmentary commentary (*peshar*) on texts from the book of the prophet Isaiah (4Q161 or 4QpIsa^a), seems to relate the messianic implications of Isaiah 11 and the defeat of the enemy of the last days referred to by means of the cipher "Kittim" (= inhabitants of Kition, a Phoenician

²⁶ Cf. Jeremias in Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich (eds. trans. G.W. Bromiley), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987) 1:468; Massingberde Ford, *Revelation* (Anchor Bible vol. 38) (New York: Doubleday, 1975) 263.

²⁷ Cf. W. H. Shea, "The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev. 16:16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (Berrien Springs, MI.) 18 (1980): 152-162.

²⁸ *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:395.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

colony on Cyprus³⁰) indicating Greeks, or Romans;

...[The interpretation of the] decree concerns the coming end of days.... [trem]bles when he [the Messiah?] ascends from the vale of Accho [= Akká'] to wage war against...³¹

Though the text and meaning of this fragment is far from clear it has been argued that “We must therefore think of the Messiah landing at Acco (Ptolemais) as the nearest point of entry to the NT battlefield of Armageddon.”³²

Armageddon as world war

On a number of occasions ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke of Armageddon in connection with the “Great War” of 1914-1918. In an address delivered at Stanford University in October 1912 he is reported to have stated,

We are on the eve of the battle of Armageddon, referred to in the 16th chapter of Revelation. The time is two years hence, when only a spark will set aflame the whole of Europe. The social unrest in all countries, the growing religious skepticism antecedent to the millennium are already here. Only a spark will set aflame the whole of Europe as is prophesied in the verses of Daniel and in the Book [Rev.] of John....³³

The first world war initiated something of a concrete “Armageddon.” In a sense, the “Armageddon” of the first world war helped topple the Ottoman Turkish powers which had imprisoned Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (whom it planned to assassinate) and inhibited the spread of the religion they championed. Interestingly, a military manoeuvre associated with the plain of Armageddon on 19 September 1918 ensured the safety of the then head of the Bahá’í religion (‘Abdu’l-Bahá) who himself often visited the “Mount of

³⁰ G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, n.d.) 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

³² John Allegro, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 75/3 (1956): 177. For a recent partly alternative reading and interpretation see F. G. Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scolls Translated* (2nd ed, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996) 186, 484-5. It is of interest to note here that a Latter-Day-Saint (“Mormon”) commentator has written that Armageddon may be “a symbolic representation of worldwide conflict centered in this [the Megiddo, loosely Mt. Carmel] area” (D.H. Ludlow, (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992) vol. 1:67.

³³ See further *Star of the West* VII/9 (August 20th 1916): 85; Masson, “The Bahai Movement – Is it the coming world religion,” *Helena Daily Independent* (February 2nd 1919) cited in *Star of the West* X/3 (April 28th 1919) + *Reality Magazine* IV/no.II (Nov. 1921).

Megiddo" (Mt. Carmel). In 1920 General Allenby (who came to be entitled Viscount Allenby of Megiddo and Felixstowe) and his wife were taken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh at Bahjí (near 'Akká, not far from Mt. Carmel).³⁴ In his *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi, summed up the effects of the "outcome" of world war I as "that tremendous struggle" in Palestine, yielded the complete liberation of "the Heart and Centre of the [Bahá'í] Faith" from Turkish yoke.³⁵

For Bahá'ís, theories associating "Armageddon" and Mt. Carmel are of great theological interest since the Bahá'í world centre and certain sacred shrines are situated on this mountain. It could be argued from the Bahá'í writings that the "battle of Armageddon" has several senses; a semi-literalistic significance and a spiritual or transcendentalised meaning. The literal sense is related in Bahá'í sources to concrete 20th century warfare. A non-literal "Armageddon" is also expressed in the varieties of anti-Bahá'í persecutions; in concrete and "theological" attacks upon or controversies within this religion.

Since Megiddo is not far distant from the foot of Mt. Carmel, it could also be taken to be indicative of the Mt. Carmel-centered Bahá'í religion, "the Heart and Centre of the Faith"³⁶ which is engaged in a spiritual battle of Armageddon ("Mt. Carmel") against the forces of irreligion. Observing a regiment of soldiers from his hotel window whilst in Stuttgart Germany in early April 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said,

The Bahá'í Grand Army consist of the invisible angels of the Supreme Concourse [*al-mal' al-a'l*]. Our swords are the words of love and life. Our armaments are the invisible armaments of Heaven. We are fighting against the forces of darkness. O my soldiers, my beloved soldiers! Foward! Foward! Have no fear of defeat; do not have failing hearts. Our supreme commander is Bahá'u'lláh. From the heights of glory he is directing the dramatic engagement. He commands us! Rush foward! Rush foward! Show the strength of your arms. Ye shall scatter the forces of ignorance. Your war confers life; their war brings death. Your war is the cause of the illumination of all mankind. Your war means victory upon victory. Their war is defeat upon defeat...³⁷

³⁴ H. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1971) 444.

³⁵ *God Passes By* 304-5.

³⁶ *God Passes By* 304.

³⁷ *Star of the West* VII/16: 157, translit. corrected.

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The diffusion of the Bahá'í teachings is not infrequently spoken about in "militaristic" terms; in terms of an Armageddon-type conflict of "light" and "darkness." Before the first world war, Abdu'l-Bahá foresaw the victory of the power of truth; "For at the end the illumination of the Kingdom will overwhelm the darkness of the world..."³⁸

On another occasion he reckoned that,

The darkness of error that hath enveloped the East and the West is, in this most great cycle, battling with the light of Divine Guidance. Its swords and its spears are very sharp and pointed; its army keenly bloodthirsty.³⁹

Certain of Shoghi Effendi's letters reflecting upon the challenges accompanying the spread of the Bahá'í religion use the language of an apocalyptic battle. Echoing the Armageddon scenario he, with almost Churchillian rhetoric, wrote the following in 1947 in "The Challenging Requirements of the Present Hour":

The stage is set. The hour is propitious. The signal is sounded. Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual battalions are moving into position. The initial clash between the forces of darkness and the army of light ... is being registered by the denizens of the Abhá Kingdom ["celestial worlds"]. The Author of the Plan that has set so titanic an enterprise in motion is Himself mounted at the head of these battalions, and leads them on to capture the cities of mens' hearts.⁴⁰

In a cable of 5 June 1957 Shoghi Effendi drew attention to the fact that horrendous events and anti-Bahá'í activity foreshadowed the "dire contests" predicted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá which were destined to "range the Army of Light against the forces of darkness, both secular and religious."⁴¹

Such apocalyptic and millennial terminology, such militaristic language rooted in the Bible and the Qur'án is not uncommon in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. In spreading the Bahá'í teachings, Bahá'ís believe that they are working for the establishment of the "Kingdom of God" on earth "as it is in heaven" (to cite the Lord's Prayer; cf. Mk. 8:38; Matt

38 *Star of the West* I/10 (1910): 1-2.

39 Cited in *Advent* 5.

40 *Citadel of Faith* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965) 26.

41 Cited in Universal House of Justice, *The Ongoing March of the Faith* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 3.

16:27; Lk 29:6, *Bahá'í World* 5:98). The “people of Bahá” as Bahá'u'lláh referred to his followers, strive both indirectly for the “lesser peace” and more distantly and directly for the “most great peace.” In many of his letters Shoghi Effendi counselled Bahá'ís to spread the unitative message of Bahá'u'lláh; not to obtain a privileged place in an exclusivist “heaven” but in order to shift humanity away from the consequences of its sometimes materialistic, racist and divisive ways.

An Armageddon scenario has continued after world war I. This terrible war could be viewed as having had continuing ramifications on into world war II and beyond. Shoghi Effendi saw world war I as a “terrible conflict, the *first stage* in a titanic convulsion long predicted by Bahá'u'lláh...”⁴² As early as 18 October 1927, in a letter to the national assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, in the course of surveying world trends and bemoaning the post-war nationalism and rejection of a “world super-state”, he anticipated world war II when he stated that “another deadly encounter”, a “cataclysm” that must ultimately hasten “the approaching era of universal and lasting peace” will come about.⁴³

In a letter addressed to the national spiritual assembly of the United States and Canada a year or so before the outbreak of world war II (dated 5 July 1938), Shoghi Effendi reckoned the years ahead “pregnant” in the light of “...The twin processes of internal disintegration and external chaos” which were being “accelerated” daily and “inexorably moving towards a climax.” Clearly predicting world war II, he wrote that, “The rumblings that must precede the eruption of those forces that must cause ‘the limbs of humanity to quake’ can already be heard...” Reference was made to biblical terminology when he further stated that ‘... The time of the end’, ‘the latter years’, as foretold in the Scriptures, are at long last upon us. The Pen of Bahá'u'lláh, the voice of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, have time and again, insistently and in terms unmistakable, warned an unheeding humanity of impending disaster...”⁴⁴

Shoghi Effendi wrote *The Advent of Divine Justice* in 1939 at the time of the outbreak of the world war II. This terrible war is referred to in its opening lines as “A tempest, unprecedented in its violence, unpredictable in its course” and “catastrophic in its immediate effects.”⁴⁵ That *Hidden Word* (Persian No.

42 *God Passes By* 305. My emphasis.

43 *Bahá'í Administration* (5th rev. ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968) 145.

44 *Messages to America* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1947) 13-14, cited in *Lights of Guidance* 442.

45 *Advent* 3. This war was viewed by the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith as a “great and mighty wind of God”; a “judgement of God” (*Advent* 4); “a retributory calamity and an act of holy and supreme discipline”; “at once a visitation from God and a cleansing process for all mankind”. It was viewed theologically by Shoghi Effendi as something “unimaginably glorious in its ultimate consequences” (*Advent* 3-4).

63, see above) mentioning an “unforseen calamity” and a “grievous retribution” was cited in this connection.⁴⁶ In a communication of Shoghi Effendi dated 13 December 1941, world war II was clearly identified as the “most great convulsion” prophesied throughout the ages,

[The] most great convulsion envisaged by [the] Prophets from Isaiah to Bahá'u'lláh, catastrophic in violence, planetary in range [is] assailing, at long last, [the] predominating nations [of the] Asiatic [and] American continents.⁴⁷

The two world wars do not, in Shoghi Effendi's viewpoint, close the period of apocalyptic “calamity.” In a letter to an individual Bahá'í dated 8 January 1949, he reckoned that, in the light of the continuing waywardness of humanity, it was “too late to avert catastrophic trials” and anticipated “still more violent upheaval and agony.”⁴⁸ Later that same year he stated that “we do not know what form the immediate future will take, anywhere” and mentioned that “great suffering will be experienced.”⁴⁹ Then also on 21 November 1949, Shoghi Effendi's viewpoint was expressed as follows, “... We have no indication of exactly what nature the [coming] *apocalyptic upheaval* will be; it might be another war.”⁵⁰ According to a letter written on his behalf in 1954, he “has never stated how far-reaching the effects of a future war will be, or what other catastrophes may accompany it or follow it.”⁵¹ On 19 July 1956, he stated that “... the condition that the world is in is bringing many issues to a head. It would be perhaps impossible to find a nation or people not in a state of crisis today. The materialism, the lack of true religion and the consequent baser forces in human nature which are being released, have brought the whole world to the brink of probably the greatest crisis it has ever faced or will have to face.”⁵²

A variety of possible apocalyptic scenarios were foreseen by Shoghi Effendi in the light of international affairs and the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. While most notably in the late 1940s and early 1950s he both wrote and spoke of terrible, cataclysmic trials to afflict humanity and

46 *Advent* 5.

47 *Bahá'í News* 150 (Jan 1942): 3.

48 *Light of Guidance* 431.

49 Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 Nov 1949 cited in *Light of Guidance* 433.

50 Letter cited in *Bahá'í News* 230/1 (April 1950). My emphasis.

51 Cited in *Light of Guidance* 130.

52 From a letter was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, dated 19 July 1956 cited in *Bahá'í News* 307 (Sep. 1956): 1-2.

destabilize humankind,⁵³ he nonetheless articulated a variety of possible futures which may or may not be realised. Future events depend on interrelated, complex, numerous and often all but unfathomable factors; such as, for example, the “positive” and “negative” state of humanity (ever-changing segments of global society), that of the constantly evolving Bahá'í and other religious communities and the inscrutable operations of the divine providence. Futurology and “prophecy” involves multiple possible futures. A third possibly nuclear world war, for example, is not necessarily anticipated in the Bahá'í writings. Scores of conflicts currently afflict humanity along with many tokens of international co-operation and reconciliation. Apocalyptic trials have afflicted humanity for most of the 20th century; a century of “light” (progress) as well as a century of terrible “darkness” (calamity). Current and increasing globalization, is furthermore, both renewing and destabilising.

The basic purpose of whatever does or does not comes to pass is, from the Bahá'í point of view, viewed positively. Human history is fundamentally for the furtherance of the unity in diversity of humankind. It has been stated that it is often through cataclysmic difficulties that, “humanity can and must be welded into some form of political unity – such as a World Federal State.”⁵⁴

Bahá'í scripture, then, has a realistic appraisal of “catastrophe” when it focuses upon the major wars and continuing socio-economic and other disruptions of the 20th century. It recognises various underlying dimensions of “catastrophe”; such as human activities revolving around materialism; racism and excessive nationalism. The decadent state of aspects of contemporary society may be seen to be an aspect of the end-time “catastrophe.” Humanity is only now beginning to see itself as an international community in need of a world order and internationally regulated justice. “Lesser peace” secular co-operation among nations and peoples is beginning. Whether or not the many “catastrophes” currently afflicting humanity will precipitate yet another major war is something that cannot be predicted. Bahá'ís are certainly advised not to dwell on such a possibility and remain confident of the bright millennial future of mankind, the coming “most great peace.”

⁵³ One of the most concrete apocalyptic predictions of Shoghi Effendi is contained in the letter of 28 July 1954 printed in *Citadel of Faith* 126. There a possible Soviet (nuclear?) bombing of racist American cities seems to be anticipated. Certain 20th century Bahá'í factions were distinctly apocalyptic in their orientation. Details cannot be gone in to here though reference, for example, might be made to R.W. Balch et. al., “When Bombs Drop, Reactions to Disconfirmed Prophecy in a Millennial Sect,” *Sociological Perspectives* 26 (1983): 137-158, and “Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy, Coping with Cognitive Dissonance in a Bahá'í sect,” in *Millennium, Messiahs and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins et al. (New York, London: Routledge, 1997) 73-90.

⁵⁴ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 5 September 1954 cited in *Lights* 130.

The millennium

Among other things, *millennium* (Latin *mille* = 1,000+ *annus* = “year”) means “a thousand years”: that thousand year or millennial period of peace which is often thought to follow the return of Christ or a final catastrophic event. An English equivalent to the term “millennium” is “chiliasm” which derives from the Greek words *chil[ia]* = “thousand” and *ete* sometimes translated *millennium* in Rev 20:1ff. It is, in fact, only in Revelation 20:1-6 that the millennium is explicitly mentioned in the Bible as a period which follows the virtual destruction of evil (see Rev. 20:2). It presupposes the reign of the returned Christ and is usually thought to precede the realisation of the “new heaven” and “new earth” prophesied in Revelation 21:1ff.

The historical placing of the millennium in the complex, multi-faceted eschatological scheme of events has led to a number of theories three of which have come to be labelled as: 1) premillennialism, 2) amillennialism and 3) postmillennialism. These varieties of millenarianism all have devout evangelical adherents today and may be briefly and sketchily summed as follows:

1) **Premillennialism** – the belief that the return of Christ will be preceded by various “signs” including wars, famines and earthquakes and followed by the “end of the world”, the “resurrection of the dead” and an ensuing millennial peace and righteousness. This view was dominant in the early Christian centuries being articulated by Papias (d.c. 130?), Justyn Martyr (d. c. 165), Irenaeus (d. c. 190) and Lactantius (d. 320) and later cautiously and variously revived by a number of Protestant reformers.

2) **Amillennialism** – the conviction that human affairs will not culminate in full millennial peace before the “end of the world” and second coming of Christ on earth. The millennium of Rev. 20 is currently the heavenly reign of Christ and the deceased saints though a future “kingdom of God” as an earthy millennium will ultimately come about. Becoming dominant after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine (d. 337) and championed by Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), this perspective became normative during the middle ages.

3) **Postmillennialism** – the view that the “kingdom of God” now gradually being extended and realised through Christian preaching and teaching will result in that peace which is the millennium. There then follows the return of Christ and the resurrection and final judgement. This perspective was espoused by many 19th Protestant century Christian

millennial factions.⁵⁵

Other Christians, including the erudite Origen (d. circa 254 CE), have interpreted the millennium spiritually in terms of the spiritual growth of the soul in this world and the next. This to some degree, for example, foreshadows the existentially oriented interpretation of New Testament eschatology by the great Marburg theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), in which the individual encounters the end-time not as the goal of cosmological history, but by virtue of an openness towards the future in the present.

Bahá'í interpretations of the millennium

While an originally Zoroastrian dualistic time-scheme of world eras – “This [perishable] Age” and “The [eternal] Age to Come” – is “an essential feature of apocalyptic”⁵⁶ since antiquity, the scheme of history has been divided into millennial periods from the early Christian era. On the basis of such texts as Genesis 2:2 and Psalm 90:4, six periods of 1,000 years were envisaged as being consummated by a seventh millennium, the commencement of the era of fulfilment – though there is also the notion of the “timeless new world of the eighth day” which follows a kind of “messianic sabbath millennial day.”⁵⁷ Notable is the foundational early Christian *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 125CE?):

Notice particularly, my children, the significance of *he finished them in six days* [Gen. 2:2a]. What is meant is, that He is going to bring the world to an end in six thousand years, since with Him one day means a thousand years; witness His own saying, *Behold, a day of the Lord shall be as a thousand years* [Psalm 90:4]. Therefore, my children, in six days – six thousand years, that is – there is going to be an end to everything. After that, *he rested on the seventh day* [Gen 2:2b] indicates that when His Son [Christ] returns, He will put an end to the years of the Lawless One, pass sentence on the godless, transform the sun and moon and stars, and then, on the seventh Day, enter into His

⁵⁵ For further details see Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of The Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977) 8; Massyngbearde Ford, ABD IV: 832-4; Malcolm Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁵⁶ See Vielhaur & Strecher in *New Testament Apocryph*, ed. E. Hennecke (2nd ed. Trowbridge: SCM Press, 1973) II: 549f.

⁵⁷ G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (London: A&C Black 1966/71) 250.

true rest.⁵⁸

The Bible incorporates divergent chronological schemes. Neither in antiquity nor today has the search for a clear cut “original” chronology behind the three major manuscript traditions (Masortaic, Samaritan, Septuagint [LXX]) yielded satisfactory resolution.

The Bahá’í interpretation of the millennium is basically premillennial. Asked the questions, “When is the millennium? Will I see it?”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in one of his tablets wrote,

Concerning the one thousand years as recorded in the Book [Bible]: It signifieth the beginning of this Manifestation until the end of its predominance throughout the contingent world; because this Cause is great, its powers are growing and its signs are dazzling. It shall continue in elevation, exaltation, growth, promulgation and promotion until it shall reach the apex of its glory in one thousand years – as the Day of this Manifestation is one thousand years. Thou shalt see its conquering power, its manifest dominion, its eternal might and its everlasting glory.⁵⁹

It is thus presupposed that for Bahá’ís, the millennium began in 1260/1844 when Sayyid ‘Alí Muhammad, the Báb declared his mission to Mullá usayn, the first believer (*biqu*) and “Letter of the Living” (*al-urf al-ayy*) whose coming to faith was, symbolically speaking (see above), a millennial, collective “resurrection” of all humanity. It was also in the same year that Bahá’u’lláh became a Bábí through the instrumentality of this first Bábí believer; very possibly as a result of a perusal of a portion of the Báb’s first major work, the *Qayy* *al-asm’* (mid. 1844 CE).

When Bahá’u’lláh semi-secretly declared his mission on the outskirts of Baghdad (Iraq) in 1863, one of the key threefold aspects of this declaration, according to a Persian tablet of the ‘Akká period revealed in the name of his amanuensis (Mírzá Áqá Ján Khadim-Alláh), was his announcement that no succeeding Manifestation of God would appear for 1000 [solar] years.⁶⁰ The Bábí-Bahá’í era is to extend for at least a millennium when another Messenger of God will renew this latest expression of the eternal religion of God. Hence Shoghi Effendi wrote that the “... the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh

⁵⁸ Trans. M. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968/75) 214.

⁵⁹ *Tablets of Abdul Baha Abbas* vol. III (comp. A. R. Windust, Chicago: Bahai Publishing Society, 1919) 659-660.

⁶⁰ See INBMC (Iranian National Bahá’í Manuscript Collection, 105 vols. Privately printed mid-1970s) 44:225.

will last for at least one thousand years.”⁶¹ The Bahá'í millennium, lasting for at least 1000 solar years, will mature into a future condition of global peace, justice and well-being. First there will be an imminent secular peace and later a future global spiritual peace characterised as the “most great peace.” At the conclusion of his *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (written in 1934), Shoghi Effendi indicates that the “New World Order” of Bahá'u'lláh has as “its consummation” the advent of that “golden millennium” which he defines (alluding to Rev. 11:15) as “the Day when the kingdoms of this world shall have become the Kingdom of God Himself, the Kingdom of Bahá'u'lláh.”⁶²

The Bahá'í millennium of peace is not a naive utopian pipe-dream for it exists in embryonic form now; Bahá'í communities exist in thousands of communities internationally and strive to attain and contribute to individual and collective peace. Neither is it an era of social or spiritual perfection. Rather the Bahá'í millennium implies a greater degree of collective security, spiritual progress, and global justice and unity. It presupposes an ongoing and balanced spiritualisation of humanity. For Bahá'ís, the “millennium” is on one level a new era of prophetic fulfilment. It can indicate the long-awaited global peace symbolically reflected in, for example, the Isaianic image of the ultimately harmonious feeding activity of the “Wolf” and the “Lamb” (Isaiah 65:25; cf. 11:6a), understood to symbolise diverse “nations” led by a “little child” (Isa. 11:6b) who shall help erect – to skip testaments and indicate Bahá'í exegesis – the “New Jerusalem” (Rev. 21) of the Bahá'í Faith. In Bahá'í exegesis the “millennium” can be viewed as the global working out and establishment of those practical and spiritual principles laid down by the central figures of the Bahá'í religion.

⁶¹ *Directives from the Guardian*. Comp. by Gertrude Garrida. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973) 21.

⁶² From the conclusion of the extended letter of Shoghi Effendi dated 8th February 1934 and entitled *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* cited in *World Order* 157 (cf. 74).