

Review of: *The Body of God: A Reader's Guide to Bahá'u'lláh's Surih of the Temple*

Author: John Hatcher

Published by: ABS (Association of Bahá'í Studies), 2022

Review by: Tom Lysaght

What Tablet did Bahá'u'lláh consider so crucial that it was among the first of His Writings that He Himself had published? Shoghi Effendi referred to this Tablet as “one of the most challenging works of Bahá'u'lláh.” If you're still unsure, as I was, maybe we both have a good excuse. An authorized translation in English of this Tablet was not published until 2002.

In a collection of five of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets, published as *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, the work in question is the first and longest — at 135 pages. In this momentous Tablet, first revealed in Adrianople (circa 1867) and later recast in Akka (circa 1969), Baha'u'llah summons the world rulers of East and West collectively, and five of them individually (three kings, a queen and a pope), both to recognize the advent of the Day of God, and to implement the world-embracing, world-directing administrative order that the Promised One has introduced. “Never since the beginning of the world,” Bahá'u'lláh declares, “hath the Message been so openly proclaimed.” This Message, this proclamation, this Tablet is the landmark *Suriy-i-Haykal*, or, the Surih of the Temple.

Only with the recent publication of John Hatcher's illuminating book, *The Body of God*, have I come to realize that those letters to world rulers, that *Tablet of the Temple*, that “Summons” of the “Lord of Hosts” was also addressed to me — and to you. Hatcher's paradoxical title for his book was carefully chosen. God, of course, cannot be personified, but in this Day of God, human beings can personify (reflect) the attributes of God. Although as far back as the first chapter of the first book of the Bible “God said, Let us make man in our image, after

our likeness” (Genesis 1:26), historically humanity has refused to identify spiritually. It has preferred material and biological identities — of nation, class, race, gender, etc. But with the dawn of the New Day of God, humanity has been both empowered and receptive to collectively identify with its one common identity — its spiritual identity, as diverse mirrors reflecting the attributes of God (justice, generosity, truthfulness, fidelity, etc.) Genesis of the kingdom of heaven on Earth has finally been set in motion. However, not only humanity, but the Earth itself, all creation can finally become the image and likeness of “the Body of God.” Hatcher explains with his “Reader’s Guide to Baha’u’llah’s *Surih of the Temple*” (his book’s sub-title) how you and I were also addressed in these landmark epistles, and thus deputized to be the agents of that historic transformation.

When Bahá’u’lláh recast His final version of the *Surih of the Temple* in Akka, He had the work rendered calligraphically in the shape of a pentacle — a five-pointed star. Hatcher discusses all the symbolic meanings, both religious and cultural, of the pentacle throughout history (the golden ratio, Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man, etc.); however, in the context of Bahá’í Writings, he points out, the pentacle represents the human body (see the Báb’s “Star Tablet” in the British Museum — or, on-line). Hatcher then proceeds to discuss the various levels of meaning of the word *Temple* in the Tablet’s title. First and literally, a temple is a physical place for communion with God. Secondly, it represents the human body as vessel of the soul, as agency by which “soul work” (service) is performed. The third level of meaning, and center around which all other meanings revolve, is the Temple of the Holy Spirit; namely, the human form of the Manifestation of God — the Holy Spirit made physically manifest. A fourth, more expansive meaning of Temple is physical reality itself, as the realm of the revelation and

reflection of the attributes of God — the Body of God, so to speak. And finally, the Temple as body politic, as divine governance; hence, Bahá'u'lláh's summons to the rulers of the world.

Hatcher brings all these meanings together for us, but not merely academically. He brings them together dynamically — as the practice of every Bahá'í's daily life. Specifically, the epistolary summons to the world's leaders to implement divine governance in the *body* politic, to establish — in Christ's words — the kingdom of heaven on Earth, is in truth a summons — or letter — to each one of us. "The pentacle, as employed by Bahá'u'lláh," Hatcher points out, "would thus seem to represent divine guidance [via the Temple of the Holy Spirit] translated into human expression [via the human temple] and delegated to human governance [in the body politic]."

In his final chapter, "Contemporary Relevance," Hatcher elucidates what Shoghi Effendi called "the society-building capacity" of the Bahá'í Faith. He helps us to understand why this key phrase — "society-building capacity" — appears again and again in the recent guidance from the Universal House of Justice. "Bahá'u'lláh speaks past them [the world's rulers]," Hatcher points out, and "we find a context in which we [ourselves] can respond to His admonitions with greater clarity and certainty" than the kings could. "We are no longer passive witnesses to a conversation between the Manifestation and the rulers to whom He delegates authority to govern — if ever we were."

How are we, as common citizens, the agents of divine governance of the world body politic? Through "the framework for action developed over the past decades," Hatcher reminds us, "under the guidance of His [Bahá'u'lláh's] Universal House of Justice." Although rejected by the kings, the epistolary summons of the *Suriy-i-Haykal (The Tablet of the Temple)* is being answered by us — in action "in neighborhoods in every country." Consequently, "no one need

await change at the level of secular governance [because] the framework within which we can act is already in place.” Like the cracking of the shell of a fertilized egg, the world order of narrow allegiances is disintegrating all around us. Rather than brooding about that, we are brooding new life into being through “the society-building capacity” of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. “Each individual is encouraged to decide,” writes Hatcher, “how he or she can most effectively become involved.”

In this wonderful “Reader’s Guide,” John Hatcher reminds us why we read Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings every morning before we dare read the news. We empower ourselves to do the integrative work of “society building,” rather than dishearten ourselves dwelling on the disintegration of inadequate and antiquated systems. His *Body of God* reminds us how we, the people (of Bahá), can create the Temple of divine polity, as well as re-create our bodily temples in the image and likeness of God — thanks to the Temple of the Holy Spirit that is Bahá’u’lláh. The pentacle design of the *Surih of the Temple* visually reminds us that we must *embody* the new Revelation. When we do, all creation will be as the Body of God.