

Most Holy Book, The: Notes on the "choice wine"

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Abdu'l-Bahá: Some Answered Questions, pages 97-100

The Symbolism of the Bread and the Wine:

Question. — The Christ said: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die." [Cf. John 6:51, 50.] What is the meaning of this utterance?

Answer. — This bread signifies the heavenly food and divine perfections. So, "If any man eateth of this bread" means if any man acquires heavenly bounty, receives the divine light, or partakes of Christ's perfections, he thereby gains everlasting life. The blood also signifies the spirit of life and the divine perfections, the lordly splendor and eternal bounty. For all the members of the body gain vital substance from the circulation of the blood.

In the Gospel of St. John, chapter 6, verse 26, it is written: "Ye seek Me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled."

It is evident that the bread of which the disciples ate and were filled was the heavenly bounty; for in verse 33 of the same chapter it is said: "For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world." It is clear that the body of Christ did not descend from heaven, but it came from the womb of Mary; and that which descended from the heaven of God was the spirit of Christ. As the Jews thought that Christ spoke of His body, they made objections, for it is said in the 42nd verse of the same chapter: "And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?"

Reflect how clear it is that what Christ meant by the heavenly bread was His spirit, His bounties, His perfections and His teachings; for it is said in the 63rd verse: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing."

Therefore, it is evident that the spirit of Christ is a heavenly grace which descends from heaven; whosoever receives light from that spirit in abundance — that is to say, the heavenly teachings — finds everlasting life. That

is why it is said in the 35th verse: "And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst."

Notice that "coming to Him" He expresses as eating, and "belief in Him" as drinking. Then it is evident and established that the celestial food is the divine bounties, the spiritual splendors, the heavenly teachings, the universal meaning of Christ. To eat is to draw near to Him, and to drink is to believe in Him. For Christ had an elemental body and a celestial form. The elemental body was crucified, but the heavenly form is living and eternal, and the cause of everlasting life; the first was the human nature, and the second is the divine nature. It is thought by some that the Eucharist is the reality of Christ, and that the Divinity and the Holy Spirit descend into and exist in it. Now when once the Eucharist is taken, after a few moments it is simply disintegrated and entirely transformed. Therefore, how can such a thought be conceived? God forbid! certainly it is an absolute fantasy.

To conclude: through the manifestation of Christ, the divine teachings, which are an eternal bounty, were spread abroad, the light of guidance shone forth, and the spirit of life was conferred on man. Whoever found guidance became living; whoever remained lost was seized by enduring death. This bread which came down from heaven was the divine body of Christ, His spiritual elements, which the disciples ate, and through which they gained eternal life.

The disciples had taken many meals from the hand of Christ; why was the last supper distinguished from the others? It is evident that the heavenly bread did not signify this material bread, but rather the divine nourishment of the spiritual body of Christ, the divine graces and heavenly perfections of which His disciples partook, and with which they became filled.

In the same way, reflect that when Christ blessed the bread and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is My body," [Matt. 26:26.] and gave grace to them, He was with them in person, in presence, and form. He was not transformed into bread and wine; if He had been turned into bread and wine, He could not have remained with the disciples in body, in person and in presence.

Then it is clear that the bread and wine were symbols which signified: I have given you My bounties and perfections, and when you have received this bounty, you have gained eternal life and have partaken of your share and your portion of the heavenly nourishment.

Abdu'l-Bahá

Notes by Brent Poirier:

"Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power."

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Paragraph 5

It seems that the offering of the "choice Wine" is an aspect of every Dispensation. The village of Cana is near Nazareth, and about twenty miles to the east of Haifa:

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had likewise been invited to the celebration. At a certain point the wine ran out and Jesus' mother told him, 'They have no more wine.' Jesus replied, 'Woman, how does this concern of yours involve me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother instructed those waiting on table, 'Do whatever he tells you.' As prescribed for Jewish ceremonial washings, there were at hand six stone water jars, each one holding fifteen to twenty-five gallons. 'Fill those jars with water,' Jesus ordered, at which they filled them to the brim. 'Now,' he said, 'draw some out and take it to the waiter in charge.' They did as he instructed them. The waiter in charge tasted the water made wine, without knowing where it had come from; only the waiters knew, since they had drawn the water. Then the waiter in charge called the groom over and remarked to him: 'People usually serve the choice wine first; then when the guests have been drinking awhile, a lesser vintage. What you have done is keep the choice wine until now.' Jesus performed this first of his signs at Cana in Galilee. Thus did he reveal his glory, and his disciples believed in him." Gospel of John 2:1-11, The New American Bible

Whenever the Manifestations give people to drink, the Holy Books say that they give abundantly. In this instance, the Jesus ordered that the water jars be filled brimful. Similarly, when Moses struck the rock in the wilderness so that the people could drink, water flowed "in abundance." (Numbers 20:11) Likewise, in the Qur'an there is a river in paradise named Kawthar which means "abundance." When the Cup is offered, it is always full to the brim:

"To those who asked He hath given to drink from the cup of guidance that brimmeth over with the wine of Thy measureless grace."

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Prayers, p. 154

"Heroes are they, O my Lord, lead them to the field of battle. Guides are they, make them to speak out with arguments and proofs. Ministering servants are they, cause them to pass round the cup that brimmeth with the wine of

certitude."

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Prayers, p. 176

"Graciously assist me, through my love for Thee, that I may drink deep of the chalice that brimmeth over with faithfulness to Thee and is filled with Thy bountiful Grace; so that, fallen upon the dust, I may sink prostrate and senseless whilst my vesture is dyed crimson with my blood." The Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 9

"May God give him to drink of a brimming cup in the everlasting gardens" (Memorials of the Faithful, p. 86)

In the Seven Valleys (p. 62) Bahá'u'lláh writes: "How crystal this cool water that the Cup-Bearer bringeth! How bright this pure wine in the hands of the Beloved! How delicate this draught from the Heavenly Cup! May it do them good, whoso drink thereof, and taste of its sweetness and attain to its knowledge."

As we see from the Gospel narrative, as a result of this wine "the disciples believed in Him." The significance is apparently that the wine signifies drawing near to and believing in Jesus. Perhaps the waiters who offered the drink of wine signify the "cup-bearer" often mentioned in the Sacred Texts.

Shoghi Effendi wrote through his secretary: "The wine mentioned in the Tablets has undoubtedly a spiritual meaning for in the book of Aqdas we are definitely forbidden to take not only wine, but every thing that deranges the mind. In poetry as a whole wine is taken to have a different connotation than the ordinary intoxicating liquid. We see it thus used by the Persian Poets such as Sa'di and 'Umar Khayam and Hafiz to mean that element which nears man to his divine beloved, which makes him forget his material self so as better to seek his spiritual desires. It is very necessary to tell the children what this wine means so that they may not confuse it with the ordinary wine.

From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, "The Light of Divine Guidance," Volume 2, pp. 9-10

Then it is clear that the bread and wine [mentioned in the Gospels] were symbols which signified: "I have given you My bounties and perfections, and when you have received this bounty, you have gained eternal life and have partaken of your share and your portion of the heavenly nourishment."

Some Answered Questions, p. 99

O SON OF DUST!

Turn not away thine eyes from the matchless wine of the immortal Beloved, and open them not to foul and mortal dregs. Take from the hands of the divine Cup-bearer the chalice of immortal life, that all wisdom may be thine, and that thou mayest hearken unto the mystic voice calling from the realm of the invisible. Cry aloud, ye that are of low aim! Wherefore have ye turned away from My holy and immortal wine unto evanescent water? Persian Hidden Words #62

"I hope that, through the favor of the Blessed Perfection, thou wilt become the lamp of the society of Green Acre (Me.), and wilt become the cup-bearer of the wine of the love of God, thou wilt invite a great number of people into the Kingdom of the Powerful Lord and wilt teach numerous souls. . . "

Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas, Volume II, p. 280

Please note that this occurred before Jesus had made His Mission public; His "hour" had "not yet come." Yet, there were those who drank, and the disciples believed. Perhaps this passage from "Memorials of the Faithful" (p. 49) concerning Mullá Muhammad-`Alí means the same thing: "This distinguished man . . . was one of those whose hearts were drawn to Bahá'u'lláh before he Declaration of the Báb; it was then that he drank the red wine of knowledge from the hands of the Cupbearer of grace." ...

...The reference to the "sealed wine" is to symbols in the Holy Books. In Súrah 83, Muhammad promises the "choice wine" whose "seal is of musk" to the "righteous" and the Guardian states that the Íqán proffers that wine. This brings to mind that in the second chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus turned "water" into "wine" at the wedding feast at Cana, and the host was asked why he had kept the choicest wine until the end of the feast: "Thou hast kept the good wine until now." (John 2:10) This may also be a reference to the Revelation destined for the time of the end.

Christians take this event literally. When I go to Haifa in January, I plan to pay a visit first to several cities, including Nazareth, and Cana is near it. I understand from the guide books that one of the churches there has stone pots and not only says these are the type used in Christ's day — they claim they are the exact stone jars! I don't even think it was a physical event.

The same image of breaking a "seal" is used in the 12th chapter of the Book of Daniel, to which the Guardian also refers, stating that the Íqán breaks the seals on the "book" Daniel refers to, destined to be opened at the "time of the end." The Íqán breaks the seal of the sealed wine, and breaks the seal of the sealed Book. This may be one and the same thing.

There are hundreds of places in His Writings where Bahá'u'lláh compares spiritual gifts to wine, as you indicate. I can't go beyond this and say that the "choice wine" would not apply as well to other works of Bahá'u'lláh. It may be that this choice wine is unsealed in many of His works, and that the Íqán is just one of them. He uses this symbol of the "choice wine" in many places in the Text, including pp. 12, 328 and 332 of Gleanings, and p. 21 of the Aqdas. My own reading is that the wine offered in the Íqán is something set apart, something special, something never before given, in previous Dispensations or in His own. I think it is a way of His emphasizing that it is important to weigh it carefully, not to take it for granted, to realize it has been set aside in the mind of God for a long time.

In researching this, I came across the Note in the Aqdas at p. 166, and in

it the House says that "Bahá'u'lláh identifies the 'choice wine' with His Revelation." So there you go...

Brent Poirier

Notes by Iraj Ayman:

The "Sealed Wine" is a Qur'anic term that has been frequently used in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and covers a variety of interrelated connotations. The same way that when the wine is sealed its qualities of aroma, taste, intoxicating and invigorating effects are concealed, the inner meanings, the true interpretation, and realities of Words of God and prophecies revealed in the Holy Books are also concealed. The only way for these realities to become known and effective is for a Manifestation of God to unseal - to open - this "Sealed Wine" by His "Fingers of Might". It shows that others, no matter how learned they may be, are unable to break that seal.

Bahá'u'lláh in a number of His Tablets offers various connotations and effects of the "Sealed Wine". He says that it refers to the Words of God, love of God, and the totality of His revelation. He uses breaking that seal as declaring His mission, revealing the inner meanings of the Word of God, unveiling the mysteries hidden in the Holy Books and prophecies of previous dispensations. He says, "Sealed Wine" mentioned in the past (a reference to verse 25 of Súrah 83 in Qur'an) refers to the "wine of ma'ai" (divine wisdom or divine mysteries) of His revelation. He adds that quaffing "the sealed wine" after the seal is broken and the "Wine" is offered to mankind means embracing the Faith. This "Wine", He says, grants a new life. He calls the believers the "cup-bearers of the Sealed Wine". Unfortunately the Tablets referred to above are not yet published in authorized translation or in original Persian and Arabic.

Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpayegani in his two major works, "Al Fara'id" and "Faslu'l-Khatib," gives further explanations on the above mentioned points in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In "Al Fara'id" page 392 he says when the Book of Íqán was revealed the seal of the Sealed Wine was broken by the fingers of the Manifestation of God and the original interpretation of the Divine verses were made clear. Therefore while Shoghi Effendi's statement in God Passes By is on the unique significance and station of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, breaking the seal of the "Sealed Wine" also refers to the totality of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and to His mission.

Iraj Ayman

Notes by Frank Lewis:

What is the meaning of the camphor fount and what is the cup tempered there?

This is the purpose underlying the symbolic words of the Manifestations of God. Consequently,

the application of the terms "sun" and "moon" to the things already mentioned hath been demonstrated and justified by the text of the sacred verses and the recorded traditions. Hence, it is clear and manifest that by the words "the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven" is intended the waywardness of the divines, and the annulment of laws firmly established by divine Revelation, all of which, in symbolic language, have been foreshadowed by the Manifestation of God. None except the righteous shall partake of this cup, none but the godly can share therein. "The righteous shall drink of a cup tempered at the camphor fountain."

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 41 [emphasis added]

Observant Baháís can be culturally and linguistically handicapped when it comes to wine metaphors. I had a devil of a time coming to grips with the terminology and referents of medieval wine convivia in Persian and Arabic poetry, but I think I can help some with camphor.

Wine in the ancient world was infrequently imbibed raw or undiluted.

There was cooked or mulled wine (the French term for cooked "cuit" has come into wine terminology as "cute") and wine was usually mixed with water or some other flavoring. The word for wine used in the 11th century Qaabus naameh is seyaki, meaning three parts to one (probably one-third water or some water-dissolved flavor such as rosewater, ginger, etc.).

The rituals of wine drinking were also quite symbolic; in Herodotus you will find a tale about how the Scythians were allowed to join the drinking circle only after having slain their first man in battle. The Persian kings drank heavily according to Herodotus, and generally took their decisions of state while drunk, to be ratified in the morning when sober. The royal wine banquet among the Persians remained an elaborate affair, all the way through the Islamic period.

Camphor (probably originally from Sanskrit kappuura, as the two trees which go by this name originated in Indochina) is one of the spices that was apparently mixed into wine, at least among the Arabs (chemical composition of it is C₁₀-H₁₆-O). It has a unique and pleasant fragrance and a bitter taste. It is white in color, and could be reduced to powder but also apparently produced whitish-transparent globules. It was widely used as a cosmetic in the ancient Near East. In Persian folklore and medicine, it was believed to be an anti-aphrodisiac,

though I'm not sure that this meaning has anything to do with the Camphor Fountain at hand. Herbs have different virtues attributed to them by different cultures at different times, and this may have been a digestive aid. I think it is still considered to have sedative properties and in ancient medicine, inhaling its fragrance was considered to relieve headaches.

While the analgesic properties may be relevant (see below), I think the semiotic range of Camphor applicable in poetry and literature is less medicinal and more in the realm of whiteness/beauty, sweet fragrance (to complement delectability) and coolness/refreshment. Persian forms many compounds with Camphor, which due to its whiteness (and the association with snow) and perfume, is metaphorically combined with verbs of raining, shedding, casting and sifting. It was kept in special vials (kaafuur daan) and the word was used in compound adjectives to refer to white clothes, white skin, white hair and there is also a word for camphor-eater.

In scripture, the Hebrew word Kopher occurs in the Song of Solomon [Canticles]: 1:14, 4:13), though this may refer rather to the Henna plant than camphor or camphire. The locus classicus for the image of the Camphor Fountain is, naturally, the Koran, where the word Kaafuur occurs only once, in Suurat al-insaan (Sura 76). Some classical dictionaries give its meaning as palm frond or calyx, specifically of an Indian tree (an exotic and therefore expensive spice), but I think the specific camphor plant is envisaged:

v5: Inna al-abraara yashrabuuna min ka'sin kaana mazaajuhaa kaafuuran
v6: `aynan yashrabu bihaa `ibaadu'llaah yufajjiruunahaa tafjiiran

The righteous drink from a cup [here, a measure of wine, not the actual vessel] mixed with camphor
A fountain [spring — `ayn] from which the servants of God drink, digging a channel for it to gush through

The paradisaical imagery goes on to describe (vv12-14) the heavenly reward for the righteous, which includes a luxurious garden, silken garb, pillows upon which one can loll about protected from the sun and from chill, with overhanging shade and boughs laden with fruit. Furthermore, there will be silver vessels and crystal goblets passed around (this an allusion to ceremonial rounds of wine-drinking, vv 15-16), and they will be served in these goblets a cup (i.e., a measure of wine [I believe]), mixed with Zanjabiil from a fountain (spring) there, called Salsabiil (vv17-18).

In modern Arabic Zanjabiil means ginger, and it was probably considered a digestive aid. More importantly, though, ginger was an exotic spice, desirable for flavoring; undoubtedly it added a certain

pungency to wine (Arabs made mostly date wine, I think, though they were by no means unfamiliar with Roman, Greek and Persian wines.

All these spiced wines were served by androgynous, unageing youths, scattered around the wassailers like white, shiny pearls, dressed in fine green silks and wavy brocades, decked with silver bracelets. God here gives them to drink a pure wine sharaaban tahuuran (Q76:19-21).

This is evidently the same wine of Suurat al-waaqi`a (Sura 56), proffered once again by androgynous youth (the famous dark-eyed Houris) circling around the reclining denizens of paradise, pouring out cups of spring-derived intoxicants into goblets from pitchers. Despite all this drinking, though, "they will not experience an after ache nor will they suffer intoxication" (56:19). Perhaps here the camphor's supposed analgesic properties are relevant.

So, in short, Baháulláh has alluded directly to a verse of the Koran, one in which the wine from a gushing spring in paradise, probably identical with the one named Salsabil elsewhere in the Koran, has been tempered with camphor, a sweet fragrance adding perhaps a slightly pungent but refreshing tang to the wine, perhaps even giving the drink a whitish hue (the color of milk and purity), and staving off a hangover.

— Most Holy Book, The: Notes on the "choice wine" (Used by permission of the curator)