

Some Answered Questions, Commentary on the Eleventh Chapter of the Revelation of John

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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Commentary on the Eleventh Chapter of the Revelation of John

By this reed is meant the Perfect Man, and the reason for His being likened to a reed is that when the latter is entirely freed and emptied of its pith, it becomes capable of producing wondrous melodies. Moreover, these songs and airs proceed not from the reed itself but from the player who blows into it. In the same way, the sanctified heart of that blessed Being is free and empty of all save God, is averse to and exempt from attachment to every selfish inclination, and is intimately acquainted with the breath of the Divine Spirit. That which He utters proceeds not from Himself but from the ideal Player and from divine revelation. Hence He is likened to a reed, and that reed is like a rod; that is, it is the succour of the weak and the support of every mortal soul. It is the rod of the True Shepherd by which He guards His flock and leads it about in the pastures of the Kingdom.

Then it is said that the angel addressed him, saying, "Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein"; that is, weigh and gauge. To gauge is to determine the quantity of a thing. Thus the angel said: Weigh the Holy of Holies, and the altar, and them that are worshipping therein—that is, investigate their true condition; discover their rank and station, their attainments, their perfections, their conduct, and their attributes; and acquaint thyself with the mysteries of those holy souls who abide in the station of purity and sanctity in the Holy of Holies.

"But the court which is without the temple leave out, and measure it not; for it is given unto the Gentiles." When, in the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era, Jerusalem was conquered, the Holy of Holies—that is, the edifice that Solomon had



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erected—was outwardly preserved, but its outer court was seized and given over to the Gentiles.

“And the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months”; that is, the Gentiles will seize and subdue Jerusalem for forty-two months, or 1,260 days, or—each day being equivalent to a year—1,260 years, which is the duration of the Qur’anic Dispensation. For according to the text of the Bible each day is a year, as it is said in Ezekiel 4:6: “thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year”.

This is a prophecy concerning the duration of the Dispensation of Islam, when Jerusalem was trodden underfoot, meaning that it was dishonoured, while the Holy of Holies remained preserved, guarded, and honoured. This state of affairs continued until the year 1260. This 1,260 years is a prophecy concerning the advent of the Báb, the “Gate” leading to Bahá’u’lláh, which took place in the year A.H. 1260. As the period of 1,260 years has been completed, the Holy City of Jerusalem is now beginning to prosper and flourish again. Anyone who saw Jerusalem sixty years ago, and who sees it again today, will recognize how it has come to prosper and flourish and how it has regained its honour.

This is the outward sense of these verses of the Revelation of John, but they also have an inward interpretation and a symbolic meaning, which is as follows. The religion of God consists of two parts: One is the very foundation and belongs to the spiritual realm; that is, it pertains to spiritual virtues and divine qualities. This part suffers neither change nor alteration: It is the Holy of Holies, which constitutes the essence of the religion of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh, and which will endure throughout all the prophetic Dispensations. It will never be abrogated, for it consists in spiritual rather than material truth. It is faith, knowledge, certitude, justice, piety, high-mindedness, trustworthiness, love of God, and charity. It is mercy to the poor, assistance to the oppressed, generosity to the needy, and upliftment of the fallen. It is purity, detachment, humility, forbearance, patience, and constancy. These are divine qualities. These commandments will never be abrogated, but will remain in force and effect for all eternity. These human virtues are renewed in every Dispensation; for at the close of each Dispensation the spirit of the law of God, which consists in the human virtues, vanishes in substance and persists only in form.

Thus, at the end of the Mosaic Dispensation, which coincided with the advent of Christ, the true religion of God vanished from among the Jews, leaving behind a form without a spirit. The Holy of Holies was no more, but the outer court of the Temple—which signifies the outward form of the religion—fell into the hands of the Gentiles. In the same way, the very heart of the religion of Christ, which consists in the greatest human virtues, is no more, but its outward form has remained in the hands of the priests and

monks. Likewise, the foundation of the religion of Muḥammad is no more, but its outward form remains in the hands of the Muslim divines.

Those foundations of the religion of God, however, which are spiritual and consist in human virtues, are never subject to abrogation but are eternal and everlasting, and are renewed in every prophetic Dispensation.

The second part of the religion of God, which pertains to the material world and which concerns such things as fasting; prayer; worship; marriage; divorce; manumission; legal rulings; transactions; and penalties and punishments for murder, assault, theft, and injury, is changed and altered in every prophetic Dispensation and may be abrogated—for policies, transactions, punishments, and other laws are bound to change according to the exigencies of the time.

Briefly, what is meant by the term “Holy of Holies” is that spiritual law which can never be changed or abrogated, and what is meant by the “Holy City” is the material law which may indeed be abrogated; and this material law—the Holy City—was to be trodden underfoot for 1,260 years.

“And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and three-score days, clothed in sackcloth.” By these two witnesses are intended Muḥammad the Messenger of God and ‘Alí the son of Abú Tálib. In the Qur’án it is said that God addressed Muḥammad, saying, “We made Thee a witness, a herald, and a warner”; that is, We have established Thee as one Who bears witness, Who imparts the glad-tidings of that which is to come, and Who warns of the wrath of God. A “witness” means one by whose affirmation matters are ascertained. The commandments of these two witnesses were to be followed for 1,260 days, each day corresponding to a year. Now, Muḥammad was the root and ‘Alí the branch, like Moses and Joshua. It is said they were “clothed in sackcloth”, meaning that they appeared to wear not a new raiment but an old one. In other words, they would initially appear to be of no consequence in the eyes of other peoples and their Cause would not seem new. For the spiritual principles of the religion of Muḥammad correspond to those of Christ in the Gospel, and His material commandments correspond for the most part to those of the Torah. This is the symbolism of the old raiment.

“These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth.” These two Souls have been likened to olive trees, since all the lamps of that time were lit at night with olive oil. In other words, these are two Souls from whom the oil of divine wisdom—which is the cause of the illumination of the world—will appear, and through whom the lights of God will shine bright and resplendent. Thus have they also been likened to candlesticks. The candlestick is the locus of the light and the place from whence it emanates. In the same way, the light of guidance would shine resplendent from these luminous Countenances.

They are “standing before God”—that is, they have arisen in His service and are educating His creatures. For instance, they so educated the barbarous, desert-dwelling tribes of the Arabian Peninsula as to cause them to attain the loftiest heights of human civilization at the time and to spread their fame and renown throughout the world.

“And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies.” This means that no soul would be able to withstand their might. That is, should anyone seek to subvert their teachings or their law, he would be overcome and defeated by virtue of that law which proceeds, whether in brief or in full, from their mouth. In other words, they would issue a command that would destroy any enemy that would attempt to harm or oppose them. And so it came to pass, for their opponents were all vanquished, dispersed, and destroyed, and these two witnesses were outwardly assisted by the power of God.

“These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy.” This means that they would rule supreme in that age. In other words, the law and teachings of Muḥammad, and the exposition and commentaries of ‘Alí, are a heavenly grace. Should they wish to bestow this grace, it is in their power to do so, and should they wish otherwise, no rain will fall, and by “rain” is meant here the outpouring grace.

“And have power over waters to turn them to blood”. This means that the prophethood of Muḥammad was similar to that of Moses, and the power of ‘Alí like that of Joshua. That is, it was in their power, had they so desired, to turn the waters of the Nile into blood for the Egyptians and the deniers—or, in other words, to turn, in consequence of their ignorance and pride, that which was the source of their life into the cause of their death. Thus the sovereignty, wealth, and power of Pharaoh and of his people, which were the source of that nation’s life, became, as a result of their opposition, denial, and pride, the very cause of their death, ruin, destruction, degradation, and wretchedness. Hence these two witnesses have power to destroy nations.

“And to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will”. This means that they would also be endowed with outward power and ascendancy, that they might school the workers of iniquity and the embodiments of oppression and tyranny. For God had granted these two witnesses both outward might and inward power, and so it is that they reformed and educated the wicked, bloodthirsty, and iniquitous Arabs of the desert who were like ravening wolves and beasts.

“And when they shall have finished their testimony”—that is, when they have accomplished that which they were bidden, and have delivered the divine message, and promoted the religion of God, and spread abroad His heavenly teachings, so that the signs of spiritual life might be manifested in the souls of men, the light of human virtues might shine forth, and these desert tribes might achieve substantive progress.

“The beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.” By this beast is meant the Umayyads, who assailed these witnesses from the pit of error. And indeed it came to pass that the Umayyads assailed the religion of Muḥammad and the truth of ‘Alí, which consist in the love of God.

“The beast made war against these two witnesses.” By this is intended a spiritual war, meaning that the beast would act in complete opposition to the teachings, conduct, and character of these two witnesses, to such an extent that the virtues and perfections that had been diffused among the peoples and nations by virtue of their power would entirely vanish, and animal qualities and carnal desires would predominate. Therefore, this beast would wage war against them and would gain ascendancy, meaning that the darkness of the error propagated by this beast would prevail throughout the world and slay those two witnesses—that is, it would extinguish their spiritual life amidst the people, obliterate their divine laws and teachings, and trample underfoot the religion of God, leaving behind naught but a dead and soulless body.

“And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” By “their bodies” is meant the religion of God and by “the street”, exposure to public view. “Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified” refers to the land of Syria and especially to Jerusalem, for the Umayyads had their seat of power in this land and it was here that the religion of God and the divine teachings first disappeared, leaving behind a soulless body. “Their bodies” refers to the religion of God, which remained as a dead and soulless body.

“And they of the people and kindreds and tongues and nations shall see their dead bodies three days and an half, and shall not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves.” As was already explained, in the terminology of the Sacred Scriptures three days and a half signifies three years and a half, and three years and a half represents forty-two months, and forty-two months—1,260 days. Since according to the explicit text of the Bible each day is equivalent to a year, this means that for 1,260 years, which is the duration of the Qur’anic Dispensation, the nations, tribes, and peoples would behold their bodies; that is, they would keep the religion of God before their eyes but would not act in accordance with it. Yet they would not suffer these bodies—the religion of God—to be laid to rest in the grave. That is, they would hold fast to its outward form and not let it entirely vanish from their midst nor allow the body to be wholly destroyed and annihilated. Rather, they would forsake its reality while outwardly preserving its name and remembrance.

That which is intended here are such kindreds, peoples, and nations as were gathered beneath the shadow of the Qur’án. These are they who would not allow the Cause and religion of God to be destroyed and annihilated outwardly as well. Thus, some manner of prayer and fasting was practised among them, but the very foundations of the

religion of God, which are goodly character, upright conduct, and the knowledge of the divine mysteries, had disappeared; the light of human virtues, which proceeds from the love and knowledge of God, had been extinguished; the darkness of oppression and tyranny, of carnal desires and satanic attributes, prevailed; and the body of the religion of God, like unto a corpse, was exposed to public view.

For 1,260 days, each day being a year—that is, for the duration of the Islamic Dispensation—all that these two Persons had established as the foundations of the religion of God was forfeited by their followers. To such an extent were the traces of human virtues—which are the bestowals of God and which constituted the spirit of this religion—erased that truthfulness, justice, love, concord, purity, sanctity, detachment, and all the heavenly attributes vanished from their midst, and what remained of the religion was mere prayer and fasting. This condition lasted for 1,260 years, which corresponds to the Dispensation of the Qur’án. It was as though these two Persons had died and their bodies were left without a soul.

“And they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth.” By “them that dwelt on the earth” is meant other peoples and nations, such as those of Europe and of distant Asian lands, who, seeing that the character of Islam had entirely changed; that the religion of God had been forsaken; that virtue, decency, and honour had vanished; and that characters had been subverted, rejoiced that the morals of the Muslims had been corrupted and that they stood therefore to be vanquished by other nations. And this indeed came to pass in a most conspicuous manner. Witness how this people who once wielded supreme power have been abased and subjugated!

The other nations “shall send gifts to one another”, meaning that they would help each other, for “these two prophets tormented them that dwelt upon the earth”; that is, they subdued and subjugated the other peoples and nations of the earth.

“And after three days and an half the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them.” Three days and a half, as we explained earlier, is 1,260 years. These two Persons whose bodies were lying soulless—that is, the teachings and the religion that Muḥammad had established and that ‘Alí had promoted, whose reality had vanished, and of which only an empty form had remained—were again endowed with spirit. That is, the spirituality of the religion of God that had become materiality, the virtues that had become vices, the love of God that had become hatred, the light that had become darkness, the divine qualities that had become satanic attributes, the justice that had become tyranny, the mercy that had become malice, the sincerity that had become hypocrisy, the guidance that had become error, the purity that had become carnality—all these divine teachings, heavenly virtues and perfections, and spiritual bounties—were, after three and a half

days (which by the terminology of the Sacred Scriptures is 1,260 years) renewed by the advent of the Báb and by the allegiance of Quddús.

Thus did the breezes of sanctity waft, the light of truth shine, the life-giving springtime arrive, and the morn of guidance dawn. These two dead bodies were once again quickened to life, and these two great Personages—one the Founder and the other the promoter—arose and were as two candlesticks, for they illumined the whole world with the light of truth.

“And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud”, meaning that from the invisible heaven they heard the voice of God, saying: You have accomplished all that was called for with regard to educating the people and conveying the glad-tidings of that which is to come. You have delivered My message to the people, raised the call of Truth, and fulfilled your every obligation. Now, even as Christ, you must lay down your lives in the path of the Beloved and suffer a martyr’s death. And so that Sun of Reality and that Moon of Guidance both set, Christ-like, beneath the horizon of the supreme sacrifice and ascended to the realm of Heaven.

“And their enemies beheld them.” That is, many of their enemies realized after their martyrdom the sublimity of their station and the excellence of their virtues, and testified to their greatness and their perfections.

“And the same hour was there a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell, and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand.” This earthquake occurred in Shíráz after the martyrdom of the Báb. The city was plunged into turmoil, and many people were killed. Great agitation ensued, moreover, from diseases, cholera, scarcity, famine, starvation, and other afflictions—an agitation the like of which had never before been witnessed.

“And the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven.” When the earthquake took place in Fárs, the survivors were wailing and lamenting day and night, and were occupied with praising and imploring God. So great was their fear and agitation that at night they could find no rest or composure.

“The second woe is past; and, behold, the third woe cometh quickly.” The first woe was the advent of the Apostle of God, Muḥammad the son of ‘Abdu’lláh, peace be upon Him. The second woe was that of the Báb, upon Him be glory and praise. The third woe is the great Day of the advent of the Lord of Hosts and the revelation of the promised Beauty. The explanation of this matter is provided in the thirtieth chapter of Ezekiel, where it is said: “The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying, Son of man, prophesy and say, Thus saith the Lord God; Howl ye, Woe worth the day! For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near.” It is therefore evident then that the day of woe is

the day of the Lord; for in that day woe is upon the heedless, the sinners, and the ignorant. That is why it is said, "The second woe is past; and, behold, the third woe cometh quickly." This third woe is the day of the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh, the Day of God, and it is near to the day of the appearance of the Báb.

"And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever." That angel refers to human souls who have been endowed with heavenly attributes and invested with an angelic nature and disposition. Voices will be lifted up and the appearance of the divine Manifestation will be proclaimed and noised abroad. It will be announced that this day is the day of the advent of the Lord of Hosts, and this Dispensation the merciful Dispensation of the Divine Providence. It has been promised and recorded in all the Sacred Books and Scriptures that in this Day of God His divine and spiritual sovereignty will be established, the world will be renewed, a fresh spirit will be breathed into the body of creation, the divine springtime will be ushered in, the clouds of mercy will rain down, the Sun of Truth will shine forth, the life-giving breezes will blow: The world of humanity will be arrayed in a new garment; the face of the earth will become even as the highest paradise; humanity will be educated; war, dissension, strife, and contention will vanish; truthfulness, uprightness, peace, and godliness will prevail; love, concord, and union will encompass the world; and God will rule forevermore—that is, a spiritual and everlasting sovereignty will be established. Such is the Day of God. For all the days which have come and gone were the days of Abraham, Moses, Christ, or of the other Prophets, but this day is the Day of God, inasmuch as the Sun of Truth will shine forth therein with the utmost intensity and radiance.

"And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, saying, We give Thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because Thou hast taken to Thee Thy great power, and hast reigned." In every Dispensation there have been twelve chosen ones: In the time of Joseph there were twelve brothers; in the time of Moses there were twelve heads or chiefs of the tribes; in the time of Christ there were twelve Apostles; and in the time of Muḥammad there were twelve Imáms. But in this glorious Revelation there are twenty-four such souls, double the number of all the others, for so does its greatness require. These holy souls are in the presence of God seated upon their thrones, meaning that they reign eternally.

These twenty-four glorious souls, though they are established upon the throne of everlasting sovereignty, nonetheless bow down in adoration to, and are humble and submissive before, that universal Manifestation of God, saying, "We give Thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because Thou hast taken to Thee Thy great power, and hast reigned." That is, Thou wilt promulgate all Thy teachings, gather all the people of the earth under Thy shadow, and bring all men

together under a single tabernacle. And although sovereignty has always belonged to God, and He has ever been and will forever continue to be the supreme Sovereign, the reference in this instance is to the sovereignty of the Manifestation of His own Self, Who will promulgate such laws and teachings as are the very spirit of the world of humanity and the cause of everlasting life. That universal Manifestation will subdue the world through a spiritual power, not through war and strife. He will array the world with peace and harmony, not with swords and spears. He will establish this divine sovereignty through genuine love, not through military might. He will promote these divine teachings through kindness and amity, not through violence and arms. Even though these nations and peoples are, in view of the divergence of their conditions, the disparity of their customs and characters, and the diversity of their religions and races, even as the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, and the sucking child and the asp, He will so educate them that they will embrace, consort with, and confide in each other. Racial antipathy, religious animosity, and national rivalries will be entirely effaced, and all will attain perfect fellowship and complete harmony under the shade of the Blessed Tree.

“And the nations were angry,” for Thy teachings ran counter to the selfish desires of the other nations, “and Thy wrath is come,” meaning that all suffered grievous loss for failing to follow Thy counsels, admonitions, and teachings; were deprived of grace everlasting; and were veiled from the light of the Sun of Truth.

“And the time of the dead, that they should be judged” means that the time has come that the dead—that is, those who are deprived of the spirit of the love of God and bereft of that life which is holy and everlasting—should be judged with equity, meaning that each should be raised up according to their worthiness and capacity, and that the truth should be fully divulged as to what depths of degradation they occupy in this world of existence and how they should, in reality, be accounted among the dead.

“That Thou shouldest give reward unto Thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear Thy name, small and great”; that is, that Thou wilt single out the righteous for Thy boundless grace, cause them to shine even as heavenly stars above the horizon of ancient glory, and aid them to show forth such conduct and character as to illumine the world of humanity and to become the means of guidance and the source of everlasting life in the divine Kingdom.

“And shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth”. That is, Thou wilt entirely deprive the heedless; for the blindness of the blind will be exposed and the sight of them that see will become evident; the ignorance and folly of the exponents of error will be recognized and the knowledge and wisdom of the rightly guided will be manifested; and thus the destroyers will be destroyed.

“And the temple of God was opened in heaven.” This means that the divine Jerusalem has appeared and the Holy of Holies has become manifest. Among the people of true knowledge, the Holy of Holies refers to the essence of the religion of God and His true teachings, which have remained unchanged throughout all the prophetic Dispensations, as was explained previously, while Jerusalem encompasses the reality of the religion of God, which is the Holy of Holies, as well as all the laws, mutual relationships, rites, and material ordinances, which constitute the city. That is why it is called the heavenly Jerusalem. Briefly, in the course of the Dispensation of the Sun of Truth, the lights of God will shine forth with the utmost splendour, and thus the essence of the divine teachings will be realized in the world of being, the darkness of ignorance and folly will be dispelled, the world will become another world, spiritual illumination will encompass all, and hence the Holy of Holies will appear.

“And the temple of God was opened in heaven.” This means also that through the dissemination of these divine teachings, the disclosure of these heavenly mysteries, and the dawning of the Sun of Truth, the portals of progress and advancement will be flung open on all sides and the signs of celestial blessings and bestowals will be made manifest.

“And there was seen in His temple the ark of His Testament.” This means that the Book of His Covenant will appear in His Jerusalem, the Tablet of the Testament will be recorded, and the meaning of the Covenant and Testament will become evident. The call of God will resound throughout East and West, and the earth will be filled with the renown of the Cause of God. The violators of the Covenant will be humbled and abased, and the faithful will attain honour and glory, for they hold fast to the Book of the Covenant and are firm and unwavering in the path of the Testament.

“And there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail”, meaning that after the appearance of the Book of the Covenant there will be a great tempest, the lightning of divine anger and wrath will flash, the thunder of the violation of the Covenant will break, the tremor of doubt will shake the earth, the hail of torments will rain upon the violators of the Covenant, and those who claim to believe will be subjected to tests and trials.