

Some Answered Questions, The Return of the Prophets

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



Some Answered Questions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Fifth Edition, page 149

The Return of the Prophets

Question: Will you explain the subject of Return?

Answer: Bahá'u'lláh has set forth a lengthy and detailed explanation of this matter in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Read it, and the truth of this matter will become clear and manifest. But since you have raised the question, a brief explanation will also be provided here.

We will preface our remarks with the text of the Gospel. It is recorded therein that when John the son of Zacharias appeared and announced unto the people the advent of the Kingdom of God, they asked him, "Who art thou? Art thou the promised Messiah?" He replied, "I am not the Messiah." They then asked him, "Art thou Elias?" He replied, "I am not." These words clearly establish that John the son of Zacharias was not the promised Elias.

But on the day of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, Christ explicitly said that John the son of Zacharias was the promised Elias. In Mark 9:11 it is said: "And they asked Him, saying, Why say the scribes that Elias must first come? And He answered and told them, Elias verily cometh first, and restoreth all things; and how it is written of the Son of man, that He must suffer many things, and be set at naught. But I say unto you, That Elias is indeed come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed, as it is written of him." And in Matthew 17:13 it is said: "Then the disciples understood that He spake unto them of John the Baptist."

Now, they asked John the Baptist, "Art thou Elias?" and he answered, "I am not", whereas it is said in the Gospel that John was the promised Elias himself, and Christ clearly stated this as well. If John was Elias, why did he say he was not, and if he was not Elias, why did Christ say he was?

The reason is that we consider here not the individuality of the person but the reality of his perfections—that is to say, the very same perfections that Elias possessed were realized in John the Baptist as well. Thus John the Baptist was the promised Elias. What is being considered here is not the essence but the attributes.

For example, last year there was a flower, and this year there has also appeared a flower. When I say that the flower of last year has returned, I do not mean that the same flower has returned with the selfsame identity. But since this flower is endowed with the same attributes as last year's flower—as it possesses the same fragrance, delicacy, colour, and form—it is said that last year's flower has returned, and that this is that same flower. Likewise, when spring comes we say



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that last year's spring has returned, since all that was found in the former is to be found again in the latter. This is why Christ said, "Ye will witness all that came to pass in the days of the former Prophets."

Let us give another illustration: Last year's seed was sown, branches and leaves appeared, blossoms and fruit came forth, and in the end a new seed was produced. When this second seed is planted, it will grow into a tree, and once more those leaves, blossoms, branches, and fruit will return, and the former tree will once again appear. As the beginning was a seed and the end likewise a seed, we say that the seed has returned. When we consider the material substance of the tree, it is different, but when we consider the blossoms, leaves, and fruit, the same fragrance, taste, and delicacy are produced. Hence the perfection of the tree has returned anew.

In the same way, if we consider the individual, it is a different one, but if we consider the attributes and perfections, the same have returned. Thus when Christ said, "This is Elias", He meant: This person is a manifestation of the grace, the perfections, the qualities, the attributes, and the virtues of Elias. And when John the Baptist said, "I am not Elias", he meant, "I am not the same person as Elias." Christ considered their attributes, perfections, qualities, and virtues, and John referred to his own substance and individuality. It is like this lamp: It was here last night, tonight it is lit again, and tomorrow night it will shine as well. When we say that tonight's lamp is the same as last night's and that it has returned, we mean the light and not the oil, the wick, or the holder.

These considerations have been explained at length in the Kitáb-i-Íqán.