

Elias, the Christ, the Prophet

By Mahmoud Bina and Alireza K. Ziarani

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?

(John 1:19-25)

Elias, the Christ, the Prophet: these are three luminaries whose advent the Jewish people had long anticipated, as attested by this passage and so also by several other passages in the Old and New Testaments. A great many men of wisdom have reflected upon the nature and function of these exalted personages throughout the sacred history of the Abrahamic religions. The question as to who may have personified these functions has been one of contention among the followers of the three great Semitic religions. While for the Jews these eminent guiding lights are yet to appear, Christians and Muslims identify them with historical figures who have already come. Even so, the Muslim interpretation of the last of the three figures differs from that generally accepted by Christians.

In this work, we reflect upon the universal significance of these three functions and their inter-relationship in the light of universal principles.¹ We will also ponder on some ideas about their possible historical personifications in the context of traditional hermeneutics of

¹ Our point of departure is not a confessional perspective advocating one or another religion; we, nonetheless, fully recognize the rights, and the divinely-willed role, of such perspectives. On the other hand, as will become clear from the rest of this work, we are far from indulging ourselves in profane speculations of the type exemplified by those profusely found in “biblical criticism” and modern “hermeneutics.”

sacred Scripture. While primarily basing ourselves on timeless principles, in order that we may develop an understanding of the context, we will consult other scriptural passages not only in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament and the Koran.

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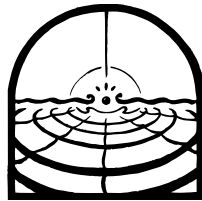
Let us begin with some preliminary considerations on how to approach sacred Scripture and their traditional interpretations and commentaries. Offering a brief outline of the metaphysical principles invoked in our considerations is also in order.

In any endeavor to understand the meaning of scriptural passages, it should first be noted that the language of sacred Scripture is symbolic, and symbolism by its nature is manifold in its signification. Thus, one possible interpretation of a scriptural passage does not necessarily exclude other possible interpretations of the same passage. Therefore, one may find different plausible interpretations of the same scriptural passage in the texts belonging to one and the same tradition; one may also find different interpretations in different religions. Such divergences, far from being a matter of sheer contradiction, reveal and expound multiple dimensions of truth; they could also be instruments of the realization of a divine plan. It should also be noted that true hermeneutics, the science of the interpretation of sacred Scripture as found in the writings of sages and saints, while benefitting from reasoning in its expression, strictly speaking, pertains to inspiration or intellection, and, as such, excludes all arbitrary speculation.²

It is necessary to also say a few words here about some fundamental metaphysical notions. The Supreme Principle, the Absolute, is the metaphysical cause of Manifestation. This Principle is reflected in Manifestation; the direct reflection of the Principle, God, in Manifestation, the created order, is the Universal Intellect, the “Spirit of God,” which enlightens and sustains the creation. The Universal Intellect, the Logos, pervades all creation, manifesting itself in the macrocosm—of which it is the luminous center—as well as in the microcosm—endowing

² Our perspective is primarily metaphysical. Thus, while we make references to, and benefit from, inspired interpretations as well as traditional commentaries, in accordance with our non-confessional perspective, we take care not to inadvertently enter too deeply into the domain of theological speculation.

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