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1. *Jahangir Looking at a Portrait of his Father Akbar.* Paris, Musée Guimet

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The Emperor Jahangir and the Iconography of the Divine in Mughal Painting

GLENN D. LOWRY

Jalal-ud-Din Akbar, the third Mughal ruler of India, succumbed to a violent illness in 1605 after transforming most of the subcontinent from a series of disparate political entities into a single powerful empire. His eldest son Selim, who succeeded to the throne, took for himself the new title of Nur-ud-Din Jahangir (which can be translated as the "world seizer and light of faith"). The transferral of power from father to son, however, was fraught with difficulties. For during the last five years of Akbar's life Jahangir was in open rebellion against his father. He seized the imperial fort at Allahabad, east of Delhi, in 1600 and two years later established an independent kingdom, striking coins in his own name, granting royal land to his followers, and assuming the title Shah.¹

Between 1603 and 1605 at least two attempts were made to resolve the political antagonism that threatened to destroy the emperor's relationship with his son. The first reconciliation came in April, 1603 when Jahangir's grandmother persuaded him to return to Akbar's court at Agra.² There he was publicly forgiven and treated with kindness, but the tensions that divided the two were not overcome. The result of this was that after seven months the prince was again at Allahabad in defiance of his father's wishes. Twenty-four months later Jahangir returned to court in anticipation of Akbar's demise. This time, though, he was not only officially reprimanded but imprisoned for ten days.

As the emperor's health began to fail, plots and counterplots instigated by Jahangir and his rivals abounded at the Mughal court. Akbar, for obvious reasons, was reluctant to pass on his authority to his eldest son and desperately looked for a suitable heir. It was only during the very last moments of the emperor's life that Jahangir's accession was guaranteed.³

A miniature painting of *Jahangir Looking at a Portrait of his Father Akbar* (fig. 1) completed shortly after the emperor's struggle for power, now in the Musée Guimet, is the subject of this paper.⁴ The conclusions that will be developed here concerning Jahangir's perception of himself as a divine ruler illuminate an aspect of imperial Mughal iconography that has only recently begun to be examined. Only two other studies that I know of even attempt to deal with this issue despite the fact that it is crucial to any understanding of the Mughals.⁵

I would like to thank Milo Cleveland Beach, Oleg Grabar, Nora Necessian, and Henri Zerner for their many wise comments and invaluable help in the preparation of this paper.

¹ For a detailed discussion of Jahangir's rebellion, see Abu'l Fazl Allami, *Akbar-Nama*, trans. H. Beveridge, III, New Delhi, 1973, 1206-1262.

² Abu'l Fazl Allami, 122-123.

³ Beni Prasad, *History of Jahangir*, London, 1922, 72-78.

⁴ Musée Guimet no. 3.676.B.

⁵ See R. Ettinghausen, "The Emperor's Choice," *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honour of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss, New York, 1961, and E. Koch, "The Influence of the Jesuit Mission on Symbolic Representations of the Mughal Emperors," *Islam in India, Studies and Commentaries*, I, 1982, 14-29.





2. Detail of fig. 1 (photo: author)

There are three inscriptions in Persian on the painting: on Akbar's orb, below Jahangir's hands, and on the margin of the page underneath the miniature. The first two inscriptions reveal that the painting shows Jahangir in his thirtieth year—that is, in 1598/99—and that the artists were Hashim and Nadir-uz-Zaman.⁶ The third inscription states that the miniature depicts the "Venerated (or saintly) Jahangir Padshah looking at a portrait of the venerated Akbar, the late emperor."⁷

Although Jahangir is represented in this painting at the age of thirty, it is unlikely that the image was made much before 1614. No comparable work by either Hashim or Nadir-uz-Zaman exists prior to the second decade of the seventeenth century. Moreover, Nadir-uz-Zaman is a title that was probably bestowed on the artist Abu'l Hasan around 1614 and is never used earlier.⁸

The painting, which was made for a royal album intended for private use, shows Jahangir reverently holding and studying a picture of Akbar. The old

emperor appears (fig. 2). He is seen in an imperial portrait draped.⁹ A golden orb, similar to that of his father, is decorated with floral stars and medallions on a red carpet. However, the central medallion on Jahangir's head,

The iconography of Jahangir presses the notion that his power rests on the aspect of this iconography of imperial mission to son. While the reality, Jahangir was challenged by his support of many reflect his insecurity and his successors inscribed with the line between the two worlds.

Jahangir, recognizing his own authority, was influencing his advisors through his memoirs, Jahangir's

Short-sighted father. Their by me. I know the traditions of wisdom.

The second element symbolized by the series of radiating prints of Christ are the *Evangelist* (fig. 3).

⁶ Kalyan Krishna, "Problems of a Portrait of Jahangir in the Musée Guimet, Paris," *Chhavi*, Golden Jubilee volume, 1971, 392-393.

⁷ Krishna, 342.

⁸ The earliest textual reference to Abu'l Hasan's title comes from a passage of 1618 in the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri of Jahangir*, ed. H. Beveridge, trans. A. Rogers, II, New Delhi, 1968, 20. There are, however, several paintings inscribed to Nadir-uz-Zaman, such as the portrait of *Prince Khurram*, dated 1615-16, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, that suggest the artist may have received this title prior to 1618. Indeed, there is nothing in the actual passage of the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* indicating that it was only in 1618 that Abu'l Hasan was honored with the title of Nadir-uz-Zaman.

⁹ For a late sixteenth-century portrait of Akbar in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

¹⁰ It has been suggested that Jahangir's heir moments before Jahangir in the Mughal chronicles, there are specific references to Jahangir's

¹¹ H. Nelson Wright, *Chhavi*, I, 1971, 100.

¹² *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 1971, 100.



emperor appears in a plain white robe and turban and holds an orb in his left hand (fig. 2). He is seen standing behind a balcony—a typical Mughal convention for imperial portraiture—over which a lavish carpet with red and gold floral designs is draped.⁹ A golden halo surrounds Akbar's head. Jahangir's disposition is similar to that of his father's. He wears a sumptuous robe that consists of a gold ground decorated with flowers and a blue collar ornamented with alternating six-pointed stars and medallions. Like Akbar, Jahangir is portrayed at a balcony covered by a carpet. However, instead of floral motifs, the emperor's textile is composed of a central medallion with two birds above and figures feasting in a garden below. Jahangir's head, too, is encircled by a golden nimbus.

The iconography of this painting consists of two interrelated elements that express the notion that the legitimacy of Jahangir's succession to his father's temporal powers rests on the fact that he alone shares Akbar's spiritual purity. The first aspect of this iconography, represented by the old emperor's orb—a standard image of imperial might—symbolizes the lawful transferral of government from father to son. While the meaning of this symbol is obvious it disguises the fact that, in reality, Jahangir was never formally invested.¹⁰ Indeed, the prince's accession was challenged by his eldest son Khusrau, who rebelled against him in 1606 with the support of many of the late emperor's followers. Jahangir's coins of this period reflect his insecurity. Rather than containing the usual references to the prophet and his successors, as found on almost all other Muslim coins, they are simply inscribed with the legend "Jahangir Shah, Akbar Shah," as if the relationship between the two was in doubt.¹¹

Jahangir, recognizing the irony of Khusrau's actions and the tenuousness of his own authority, tried to downplay his conflict with Akbar. He did this by blaming his advisors for his filial disloyalty. In the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, the emperor's memoirs, Jahangir states, for instance, that:

Short-sighted men in Allahabad had urged me to rebel against my father. Their words were extremely unacceptable to me and disapproved by me. I know what sort of endurance a kingdom would have, the foundations of which were laid on hostility to a father.¹²

The second element of the painting's iconography is more complicated. It is symbolized by the emperors' haloes. The origin of this motif, which is made up of a series of radiating lines of varying length, is clear. It was borrowed from European prints of Christ and the apostles, such as Philip Galle's engraving of *Saint Matthew the Evangelist* (fig. 3), which was in India by 1587, brought to the Mughals by Jesuit

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⁹ For a late sixteenth-century use of this convention, see folio 113 of the *Akbar-Nama*, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

¹⁰ It has been suggested by Prasad, *History of Jahangir*, 72-76, that Akbar did in fact indicate that Selim was to be his heir moments before his death. There is, however, almost no evidence to support this claim. None of the major Mughal chronicles, for example, mention any public proclamations of support for Selim by Akbar, nor are there specific references to an investiture in later texts.

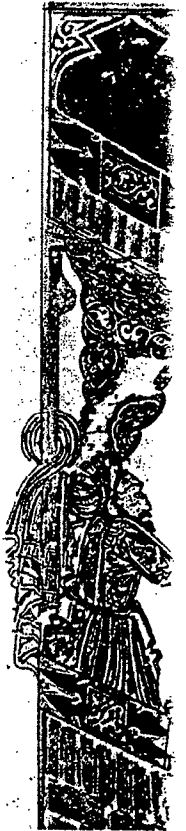
¹¹ H. Nelson Wright, *Coins of the Mughal Emperors of India*, New Delhi, 1975, 64-68.

¹² *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 65.

3. Philip Galle after Martin van Heemskerck, *Saint Matthew the Evangelist*, engraving (from M.C. Beach, "The Mughal Painter Kesu Das," *Archives of Asian Art*, XXX, 1976-77, 35)



4. *Christ and Jahangir*, c.1615. London, Chester Beatty Library (photo: Pieterse-Davison International)

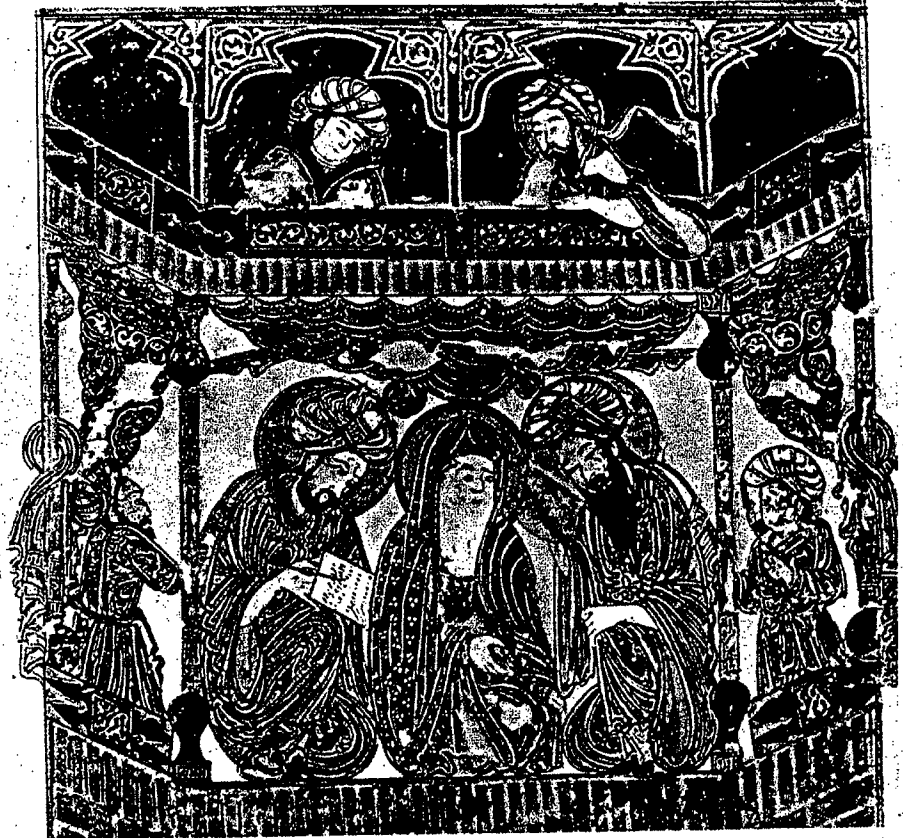


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¹⁴ Mulla 'Abd al-Baqi
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¹⁵ Haloes also appear in
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5. Authors, Scribes, and Attendants from the *Rasa'il Ikhwan*. Istanbul, Library of the Suleymanic Mosque

missionaries.¹³ A double portrait of *Jahangir and Christ* (fig. 4), c.1615, now in the Chester Beatty Library, clearly demonstrates that the sacred significance of the nimbuses in these prints was understood by the Mughals. In the painting both Jahangir and Christ are standing behind balconies, one above the other, with haloes around their heads. The emperor's nimbus, though, is much brighter than Christ's, emphasizing his special radiance and recalling the words of one of Jahangir's biographers: "By [his] breath he [Jahangir] is Christ the brightest moon. . . ."¹⁴

Nimbuses in Islamic art are not unique to the paintings of Jahangir. They appear, for example, in the images of thirteenth-century manuscripts such as the *Rasa'il Ikhwan* (fig. 5), now in Istanbul, as well as many later manuscripts.¹⁵ In these works, though, haloes are used only for visual emphasis and are found on the heads of most of the figures, whereas in Mughal painting, they are reserved for

¹³ Milo Cleveland Beach, "The Mughal Painter Kesu Das," *Archives of Asian Art*, XXX, 1976-77, 35-36.

¹⁴ Mulla 'Abd al-Baqi Nahavandi, *Ma'asir-i Rahimi*, as quoted by Koch, "The Influence of the Jesuit Mission on Symbolic Representations of the Mughal Emperors," 27.

¹⁵ Haloes also appear in the *Kitab ad-Diryaq*, now in the National-bibliothek, Vienna (A.F. 9) attributed to the mid-thirteenth century, as well as the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, now in the British Museum (Add. 22.111), c.1300.

members of the imperial family and are unknown prior to the reign of Jahangir. As such they can be interpreted as a visual equivalent of the Muslim notion that the ruler is "God's shadow on earth." Jahangir himself explains this in his memoirs. He writes, for instance, of his titles:

An inspiration from the hidden world brought it into my mind that in as much as the business of kings is controlling the world; I should give myself the name of Jahangir [or worldseizer] and make my title of honour Nur-ud-Din [or light of faith], in as much as my sitting on the throne coincided with the rising of the sun on earth and of great light.¹⁶

The nimbuses in the Guimet painting, however, signify more than just royalty, for Akbar was regarded by his followers — and by Jahangir — as a saint and spiritual leader. Abu-l Fazl, the emperor's official biographer, records that:

At the above mentioned time of everlasting auspiciousness, the novice with his turban in his hands, puts his head on the feet of his majesty. . . . His majesty, the chosen one of God, then stretches out his hand of favour, raises the suppliant, and replaces the turban on his head, meaning by these symbolical actions that he has raised up a man of pure intentions. . . who has now entered into real life.¹⁷

Faiyzi, one of Akbar's greatest poets, is even more explicit about the emperor's divinity. He states that, "If you wish to see the path of guidance as I have done, you will never see it without seeing the king,"¹⁸ and "Thy old fashioned prostration is of no advantage to thee — see Akbar and you see God."¹⁹

In the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, Jahangir elaborates on these themes and writes of his father that "In his actions and movements he was not like people of this world, and the glory of God manifested itself in him."²⁰ In addition to describing Akbar in this manner, Jahangir refers to him on at least one occasion as, "My guide, that veritable qibla [direction of prayer] and visible deity."²¹

Akbar's sanctity in the painting under discussion is evinced not only by his halo but by the white of his simple robes and turban, for white is associated in the mystical literature of Islam with the soul's quest for enlightenment. Often, as can be seen in a portrait of a shaikh (fig. 6), c.1620, now in the Chester Beatty Library, it is used to denote the spiritual purity of holy men.

Jahangir also saw himself as sacrosanct.²² In the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* he relates that just before the death of Selim-ud Din Chisti — the saint after whom he was named as a child — the mystic took his own turban from his head and placed it on Jahangir's, indicating that the prince was his spiritual heir.²³ This relationship is

¹⁶ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 3.

¹⁷ *Ain-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, I, New Delhi, 1977, 174.

¹⁸ *Ain-i Akbari*, 631.

¹⁹ *Ain-i Akbari*, 632.

²⁰ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 34.

²¹ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 65.

²² Ettinghausen, 100-102.

²³ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, II, 70-71.



6. Portrait of a Shaikh, c.1620

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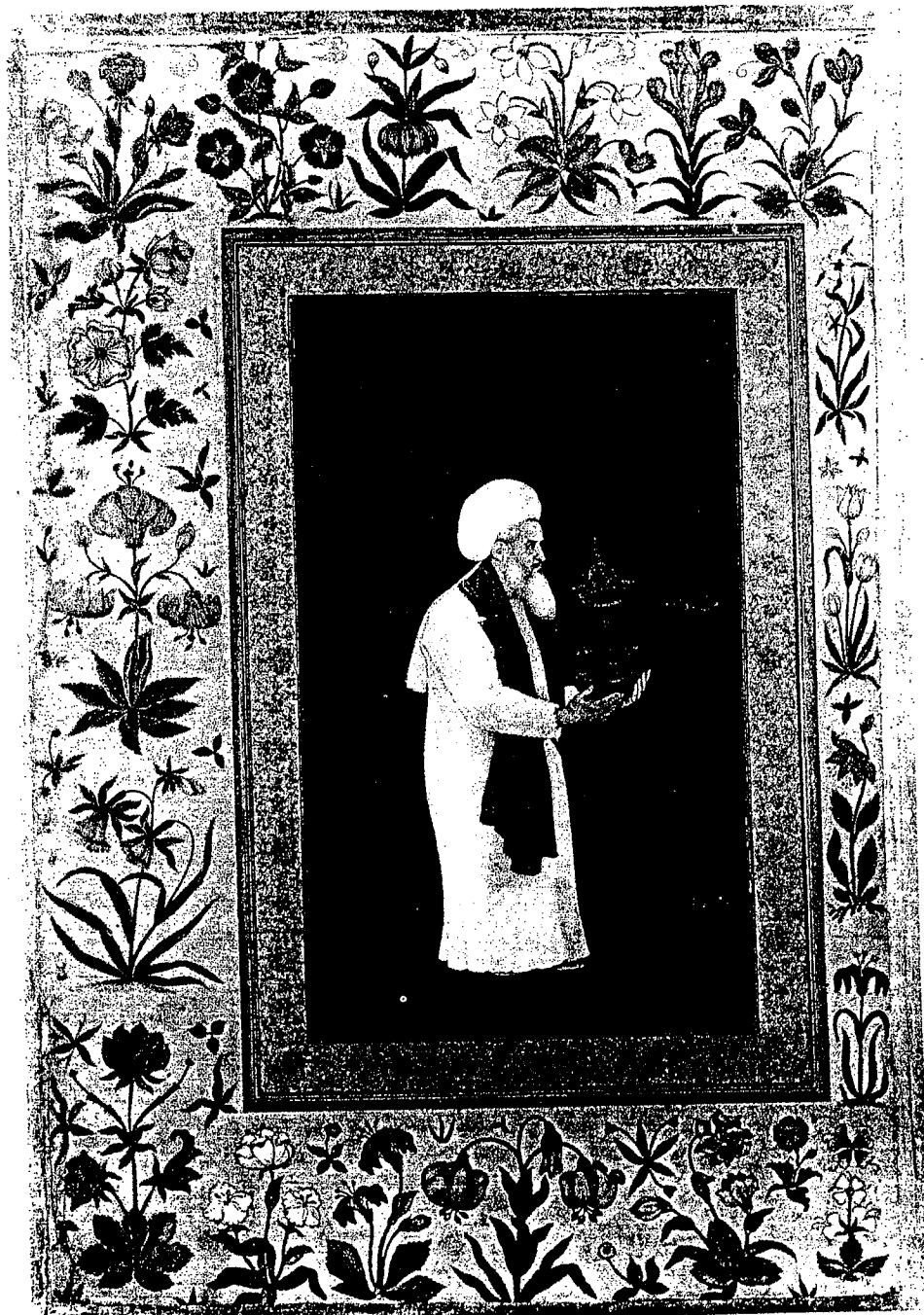
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6. *Portrait of a Shaikh*, c.1620. London, Chester Beatty Library (photo: Pieterse-Davison International)



7. *Selim-ud-Din Chisti with the Young Prince Selim* from the *Berlin Album*, c.1610. West Berlin, Staatsbibliothek



8. Detail of Fig. 1 (photo: author)

evident in a painting (fig. 7), c.1610, from an album now in Berlin, that represents Jahangir as a prince studying with Selim-ud Din Chisti. Both Jahangir and the saint have nimbuses around their heads indicating their divine status.

The implications of this for the painting of *Jahangir Looking at a Portrait of his Father* are important. Jahangir's examination of Akbar's picture and their common

haloes demonstrate his father's saintly status, his political rivalry, and Jahangir by the inscription on the r and Jahangir by temporal elements. Jahangir who se-

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²⁴ E. Baer, *Sphinxes and*

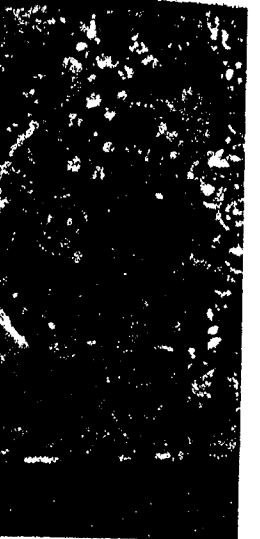
²⁵ *The Koran Interpreted*, tr. mel, "The Celestial G Washington, 1976.

²⁶ H.P. L'Orange, *Studi*

²⁷ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 1:



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haloes demonstrate that in addition to the emperor's own natural powers he shares his father's saintliness. The inheritance of this quality distinguishes Jahangir from his political rivals for it is not only immutable but he alone possesses it. The inscription on the margin of the painting confirms this status. It identifies both Akbar and Jahangir by the term *hazrat* (saintly). What is extraordinary here is that the temporal elements in the painting, such as the orb, are almost entirely shunned by Jahangir who seems to prefer instead the sanctity given to him by the halo.

The turning away from the worldly towards the spiritual is further rendered explicit by the carpet that is draped over the side of Jahangir's balcony, directly below the emperor (fig. 8). Its imagery can be divided into two parts. On the one hand, the birds represent celestial creatures associated with the elevation of kings to heaven in the literature of the ancient Near East as well as the Islamic art of Iran.²⁴ On the other hand, the figures pouring libations and seated in a garden reflect the Muslim concept of paradise, described in the Qur'an as a garden where the blessed recline on couches and are served drinks from vessels of silver and crystal by immortal youths.²⁵ The paradisaical aspects of this scene are reinforced by the central medallion of the carpet, which may represent an image of the revolving cosmos or the shield of heaven.²⁶ Although it is impossible to be certain about the significance of the medallion, its prominence clearly acts as a counterbalance to the circular shape of Akbar's orb so that on a visual level, at least, the two appear to be related.

A number of points can be made about the meaning of this portrait. The first is that Jahangir consciously appropriates a motif from Christian imagery in order to render visible the sacred character of his rule, upon which his legitimacy hinged. The second is that, in doing this, Jahangir transforms the verbal metaphor of "God's shadow on earth" into an observable reality. Thus, by holding his father's portrait and sharing the latter's nimbus Jahangir asserts that the lawfulness of his rule is not simply a function of his temporal authority. He suggests instead that this authority is legitimized by the very divinity of his sacrosanct character, which transgresses all questions of political or temporal power. Finally, this image attempts to show that the conflict marring the last years of Jahangir's relationship with Akbar had been resolved by presenting the emperor as an admiring and worshipful son. A poem, written during the first years of Jahangir's reign, expresses the various attitudes of Jahangir towards his father presented in this discussion and reflected by the painting of *Jahangir Looking at a Portrait of his Father Akbar*:

If the world illuminator had a son
There would be no night; it would always be day
For when his gold-crowned head was hidden
His son would display his tiara peak
Thanks that after such a father
Such a son sits in his place.²⁷

Harvard University

²⁴ E. Baer, *Sphinxes and Harpies in Medieval Islamic Art: An Iconographic Study*, Jerusalem, 1965, 54.

²⁵ *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A.J. Arberry, New York, 1955, Surah 4:57; 47:15; 76:12-22. Also see A.S. Schimmel, "The Celestial Garden in Islam," *The Islamic Garden*, ed. E. MacDougall and R. Ettinghausen, Washington, 1976.

²⁶ H.P. L'Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World*, Oslo, 1953.

²⁷ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, I, 141.