

of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfill in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of divine virtue.”¹

It is immediately clear that Bahá’ulláh intends to provide a link between the received wisdom of the past and the moral-ethical imperatives guiding modern man. What is timeless in the past is revived in the present and built upon for the future.

Although this paper focuses primarily on the formal aspects of the Persian verses of *The Hidden Words*, some introductory words on the contents of the whole work are in order. Close analysis of the text shows that it contains, in highly compressed form, the seeds of Bahá’ulláh’s principles for regeneration of the individual and society as revealed in his later texts. The mystical vision of the human soul attaining its ultimate goal of transcendence is related to the precepts of social equality, political democracy and economic justice.

Any discussion of the literal form of a sacred religious traditional text evokes a set of familiar problems. Since the Bahá’í Faith developed from the cultural matrix of Islam, one should note the precedence of this issue in that context. Early debates about the originality of the style of the Koran led to the concept of *e Jáz* or the miraculous inimitability. Taken to its logical conclusion, this concept leads to the perceptually ludicrous and doctrinally untenable conclusion that God is exclusively Arabophone, but this does not appear to have bothered most devout Muslims. In marked contrast to this view, and perhaps to forestall any such tendencies among his followers, Bahá’ulláh makes no claim of *e Jáz* for his writings. In fact, in *The Hidden Words* (Arabic 67) he says clearly:

“...All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and melody of My voice.”²

This may be taken as a definition of revelation in Bahá’í doctrine as a form of language comparable to the language of mankind and not to

1. Bahá’ulláh, *The Hidden Words*, translated by Shoghi Effendi, Baha’i Publishing Trust,

Wilmette, Illinois, 1948, p. 3.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

that of God. It is therefore natural that it should be influenced by human speech.

Seen in this light the formal roots of some parts of *The Hidden Words*, especially those in Arabic, may be found in Islamic homiletic traditions such as the *Na?J al-Baláge* (attributed to Alh) and even more

so in the *ʔadhs-e Qodsh*. It is more difficult generically to isolate the Persian parts of *The Hidden Words* and to identify the provenance of their formal features. While they belong entirely within the cultural domain of Persian literature, the overall texture of the work far surpasses any traditional genre in its complexity, variety and originality. In some verses of the Persian *Hidden Words* we can discern an affinity with the genre of *andarz-náme* (Book of Advice), which has strong precedence in Sasanian times and may go back as far as the Parthian era; and both the *saJ* (rhymed prose) style as well as the aphoristic tone of certain passages recall the *Golestán* of Sa dh.

The very opening of the Persian part of *The Hidden Words*, as Professor Frank Lewis has observed,³ reads almost like a catalogue of classical motifs:

“O YE PEOPLE THAT HAVE MINDS TO KNOW AND EARS TO HEAR!

The first call of the Beloved is this: O mystic nightingale! Abide not but in the rose-garden of the spirit. O messenger of the Solomon of love! Seek thou no shelter except in the Sheba of the well-beloved, and O immortal phoenix! dwell not save on the mount of faithfulness. Therein is thy habitation, if on the wings of thy soul thou soarest to the realm of the infinite and seekest to attain thy goal.”⁴

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3. Frank Lewis, “Scripture as Literature: sifting through layers of the text,” in *Baha’i*

Studies Review, Volume 7, 1997, p. 12.

4. Bahá’ulláh, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

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Bahá’ulláh’s true poetic gift is evident in this passage, not just his musical handling of the familiar tropes of Persian classical literature, but also the way in which he imbeds in the subtext of *The Hidden Words* motifs that have profound cultural associational resonance for any literate Persophone. The *hodhod* (hoopoe) of the Solomon of love immediately activates a chain of associations with the *Conference of the Birds* of

A††ár

and the corpus of Qeṣṣá al-Anbhyá'; as does the mention of anqá' upon the mountain of Qáf, which resonates with the Shmorg of both A††ár and Ferdowsh. In the 7th Persian verse of The Hidden Words, which begins with "O Son of Love" (Ey Pesar-e ?obb),⁵ there is an even more resonant allusion to the me ráJ, the night-journey of Muhammad. ?obb is the root of ?abhb, the sobriquet bestowed on the prophet Muhammad, and the mention of rafráf, cushions [of clouds] evokes the highest level to which Muhammad ascended. It ends with the startling assertion that by paying heed to what has been revealed by the pen of Bahá'ulláh one may even go two steps beyond the terminus of the me ráJ.

"O SON OF LOVE

Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity. Give ear then to that which hath been revealed by the pen of glory."⁶

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What is remarkable is the variety, complexity and novelty of the fabric of the Persian verses, woven of familiar threads. To begin with, despite a surface similarity of style, they cannot be fitted into any one generic mold. They range from clear and unambiguous pieces of advice (andarz) for living a virtuous, chaste and pious life, to mystical visions of the human soul transcending the limitations of this life, to symbolic and allegorical narratives that may have historical allusions, to rhapsodic passages that are song-like in tone, to stern admonitions to the heedless

5. Bahá'ulláh, The Hidden Words, p. 24.

6. Ibid., p. 24.

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rich, the unjust ruler and the thoughtless neighbor. Some are spoken with the voice of God, some clearly with Bahá'ulláh's own voice and some with an impersonal voice.

The combination of mystical exhortation and practical ethical advice, which we find in the 3rd Persian verse of The Hidden Words, is also characteristic of several others and defies the simplistic characterization of the text as "mystical". It evokes an otherworldly vision with a sober, worldly moderation, walking the mystic path with feet, so to speak, still firmly planted on the ground.

“O FRIEND!

In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love, and from the nightingale of affection and desire loosen not thy hold. Treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly.”⁷

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In number 5 there is a succinct rule for the cultivation of healthy human relations.

“O SON OF DUST

Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother. Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.”⁸

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Number 18 is one of several of the Persian verses in *The Hidden Words* in which Bahá’ulláh makes a not very oblique allusion to his own station as the Supreme Manifestation expected by the Bábh community.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

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“O YE DWELLERS IN THE HIGHEST PARADISE!

Proclaim unto the children of assurance that within the realm of holiness, nigh unto the celestial paradise, a new garden hath appeared, round which circle the denizens of the realm on high and the immortal dwellers of the exalted paradise. Strive, then, that ye may attain that station, that ye may unravel the mysteries of love from its wind-flowers and learn the secret of divine and consummate wisdom from its eternal fruits. Solaced are the eyes of them that enter and abide therein!”⁹

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Number 19 is an evocation of a mystic gathering and a primordial covenant.

“O MY FRIENDS

Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you.”¹⁰

9. Ibid., p. 27.

10. Ibid., pp. 27-8.

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Number 24 is addressed to the *olamá* of Bahá'ulláh's time, but rings true of power-seeking ecclesiastics of all denominations at all times.

“O YE THAT ARE FOOLISH, YET HAVE A NAME TO BE WISE
Wherefore do ye wear the guise of shepherds, when inwardly ye have become wolves, intent upon My flock? Ye are even as the star, which riseth ere the dawn, and which, though it seemth radiant and luminous, leadeth the wayfarers of My city astray into the paths of perdition.”¹¹

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Numbers 48 and 74 are clear assertions of social equality and its corollary, political democracy. Numbers 49, 53 and 54 set forth the principle of economic justice by reminding the rich of their moral responsibility and entrusting to them the care of the poor.

“O YE RICH ONES ON EARTH!

The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.”¹²

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11. Ibid., p. 30.

12. Ibid., p. 41.

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Numbers 62 and 63 are powerful condemnations of oppression and tyranny.

“O OPPRESSORS ON EARTH!

Withdraw your hands from tyranny, for I have pledged Myself not to forgive any man’s injustice. This is My covenant which I have irrevocably decreed in the preserved tablet and sealed it with My seal of glory.”¹³

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Number 76 is a narration of a symbolic event, which may have a historic imprint but carries also a timeless echo of some of Sohravardh’s visionary recitals.

“O SON OF JUSTICE!

In the night-season the beauty of the immortal Being hath repaired from the emerald heights of fidelity unto the adratol-Montahá, and wept with such a weeping that the concourse on high and the dwellers of the realm above wailed at His lamenting. Whereupon there was asked, Why the wailing and weeping? He made reply: As bidden I waited expectant upon the hill of faithfulness, yet inhaled not from them that dwell on earth the fragrance of fidelity. Then summoned to return I beheld, and lo! certain doves of holiness were sore tried within the claws of the dogs of earth. Thereupon the Maid of heaven hastened forth unveiled and resplendent from Her mystic mansion, and asked of their names, and all were told but one. And when urged, the first letter thereof was uttered, whereupon the dwellers of the celestial chambers rushed forth out of their habitation of glory. And whilst the second letter was pronounced they fell down, one and all, upon the dust. At that moment a voice was heard from the innermost shrine: ‘Thus far and no further.’ Verily we bear witness to that which they have done and now are doing.”¹⁴

13. Ibid., p 44.

14. Ibid., pp. 49-50.

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In numbers 79, 80 and 81 we hear the “footsteps on solid ground”. These verses are exhortations to useful labor, fruitful endeavor and avoidance of idleness and sloth.

“O MY SERVANT!

The basest of men are they that yield no fruit on earth. Such men are verily counted as among the dead, nay better are the dead in the sight of God than those idle and worthless souls.”

“O MY SERVANT!

The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.”¹⁵

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15. Ibid., pp. 51.

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No words can convey the rhetorical richness of Bahá'ulláh's *The Hidden Words* and the force of ethical imperatives better than his own conclusion:

“The mystic and wondrous Bride, hidden ere this beneath the veiling of utterance, hath now, by the grace of God and His divine favor, been made manifest even as the resplendent light shed by the beauty of the Beloved. I bear witness, O friends! that the favor is complete, the argument fulfilled, the proof manifest and the evidence established. Let it now be seen what your endeavors in the path of detachment will reveal. In this wise hath the divine favor been fully vouchsafed unto you and unto them that are in heaven and on earth. All praise to God, the Lord of all Worlds.”¹⁶

16. Ibid., pp. 51-2.

— The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah (Used by permission of the curator)