

Despite the truly vast and variegated literary legacy of the Báb, the term "lawh" was employed in only one instance as part of the title of an actual work by him: the Lawh al-Hurúfát, sometimes referred to as the Lawh-i hayákil. Even here, though, it is not certain that the Báb himself gave the work this title, since it has been demonstrated that the composition that goes by this name is in a reality a part of a much longer work. (MacEoin, p. 88-9, 95). In the Bayán-i Fársí, the Báb refers to his writings as "tablets" in a general way (BF, p.293: váhid 8, báb 11; see also pp. 67; 2:17 & 100; 3:15 & p.97; 3:14, discussing how the holy verses should be written down). The Báb also refers to letters he has written to individuals as tablets (Afnan, p. 610). Also, in his Dalá'il-i Sab`a he refers to that composition as a tablet (p.55).

However, the Báb did use the word lawh to refer to various metaphysical "tablets" whose place and function in his teachings remain to be studied. In his earliest sustained work, the Tafsír súrat al-baqara, the term occurs several times, e.g. in his reference to a lawh al-sadád, a repository of divine revelation (Baq, p.55). In the Qayyúm al-asmá there is frequent mention of "lawh" as in such epithets as the Koranic, lawh mahfúz, or the variation lawh hafíz (QA, p.7) or the tablets on which the deeds of mankind are inscribed (QA, p. 58) and other usages to indicate that the heavenly Preserved Tablet has now been fully communicated to the sublunar realm: lawh-i mastúr, lawh-i manshúr (SWB, p.109/154). In these cases, and in line with standard Islamic teaching (Wensinck), the Báb is referring to the heavenly source or archetype of revelation.

The infrequently used term lawh to designate works written by the Báb, came to be regularly used in titles of works by Bahá'u'lláh and, to a lesser extent, in works by his son and successor, `Abbás Effendi, `Abdu'l-Bahá' (q.v. see below). It is not clear how the designation lawh came to be one of the most characteristic for the scriptures of the founder of the Bahai Faith.

Generally speaking, it is not used by authors writing in Persian and Arabic previously. (But see the Ketáb al-lawh ascribed to Muhyi al-Dín Ibn al-`Arabí (q.v.) in Yahia, vol.2, p.344, #370.) An unpublished work by a staunch contemporary critic of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, Muhammad Karím Khán Kirmání (q.v.) entitled Lawh-e Mahfúz "fí ma`refat ertesám-e lawh" is mentioned in Ibrahímí (vol.2, p.178)" but according to the Fihrist, there are no alwáh ascribed to either Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (q.v.) or to his successor, Sayyid

Kázim

Rashtí (q.v.), the first two leaders of the so-called Shaykhíya (q.v.) and figures recognized by the Bábí/Bahá'í tradition as intellectual and spiritual forebears.

One can mention here, however, a characteristic and influential hermeneutic assumed

in the explanation by Rashtí of a hadíth he ascribes to the Prophet on the letter "b" of the basmala. Rashtí says that this "b"

is the Preserved Tablet, *lawh mahfúz* mentioned in the Koran. (Rashtí, p. 82). However, the question of whether or not the Bahai usage may be ascribed to Shaykhí influence awaits further study.

All of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh are considered revelation and *alwáh*, even those works produced before the author made an explicit claim to be in receipt of such as a function of his dignity as Divine

Manifestation (*mazhar-i iláhi*). There is no space here to attempt a thematic analysis of the more than 15,000 items covered by the term extant in the archives

and library of the Bahai World Centre. Cataloguing this corpus is far from complete,

but it is generally acknowledged that the vast majority of these tablets are in the form of written communication to individual followers and/or questioners of Bahá'u'lláh. Many of them are very brief and personal, perhaps also functioning

as something of a talisman for the recipient. Thus, *lawh/alwáh* bears in this case the connotation of "epistle" as this term is used in the New Testament: a weighty, religiously charged solemn communication akin to "Papal bull". As an echo of the Shí'í usage (see below), Bahá'u'lláh refers to himself

as the Preserved Tablet (Prayers, p. 286/191; *Átár*, vol. 5, p. 141).

In this usage, therefore, we have the continuation of a melding of identity and authority of person and text common to Shí'í Islam — as in the characteristic

hermeneutical syzygy: the Silent Book (*ketáb-i sámét*), e.g. the Holy Scripture

itself and the Speaking Book (*ketáb-i náteq*), the Prophet and/or the Imam. (Ayoub).

Bahá'u'lláh's oeuvre has been classified into four categories by the eminent Bahá'í scholar, Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpayagání (q.v.)

as follows: laws and ordinances, meditations, communes and prayers, interpretations

of sacred scriptures of the past; discourses and exordiums. The *alwáh* listed below contain, to one degree or another (and in many cases within the same *lawh*),

all of this multifarious subject matter, and it would be impossible to discuss this fully here. A definitive understanding of the term will have to await the complete analysis of all the tablets preserved in the Bahai Archives and ascribed to Bahá'u'lláh. It is obvious that the designation refers to a quality that transcends the limitations of genre, style and content. A brief look at some more of the Islamicate background for the term may be helpful. The word occurs once in the singular in the Qur'án, viz lawh mahfúz (85:22) and 4 times as a plural: three of these are the tablets written by God for Moses (7:145, 150, 153).

The remaining instance of alwáh is in the story of the Flood. Noah's ark is called "something made of planks" (dhát-i alwáh 54:13) in which Núh and his entourage were saved. Shî'í tradition refers to the Prophet/Imam/Walí as the Preserved Tablet (Ámúlí, p. 383, quoting the Khutbat al-bayán ascribed to `Alí, & Isfahání, p. 294 for a general discussion) and both the Báb (QA passim, and Bahá'u'lláh (see below) continue this usage. In addition, the Hadíth, especially Shî'í akhbár, tell the story of the lawh or sahífa of Fátéma bint al-Rasúl (q.v.), the wife of the the first Imam `Alí. (Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pp.185-89, esp. 188 & "Fátéma") This tablet, hidden from mankind until the day of the return of the Qá'im (Sachedina, p. 22), was given by God to Fátéma to help her endure the profound sadness of the death of her father, Muhammad. The Tablet, written on green chrysolite or white pearl in letters "brighter than the sun", assured Fátéma that her progeny would be the bearers of the Imamate and, in fact, named each of the remaining eleven, from Hasan to the Qá'im, Muhammad ibn Hasan al-`Askarí. In the text of this secret Tablet as reproduced in Kulayni (vol 1, pp.527-28) it is specified that the Qá'im will bring with him numerous attributes of the prophets of old among which the glory of Jesus (bahá'-e `sá). Such would most certainly have had a special meaning for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, particularly those who might have become aware of this text through the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (e.g. Ziyara, 1, pp. 184-86).

One of the earliest compositions of Bahá'u'lláh was in fact originally entitled "The Hidden Book of Fátéma" indicating that the Shî'í eschaton was now at hand (Eshraq-Kháveri, p. 624). This work was retitled later Kalimát-i maknúna ("The Hidden Words"), preserving the idea of hidden knowledge without explicit reference to a Shî'í salvation history.

But, it would seem that the association of lawh and/or sahífa with Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the Shí'í messiah would remain a permanent feature of his ministry. Certainly the Báb had proffered similar textual evidence in publishing the Qayyúm al-asmá, which for all intents and purposes functioned for his early followers as the True Qur'án, simultaneously new and ancient, hidden until now with the Qá'im. Thus we see Shí'í eschatological fulfillment configured as much by the appearance or return of messianic texts as by the return of persons.

It should be added, however, that Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Book of Fátima will frustrate a literal reading of the Hadíth inasmuch as the original text as recorded

there in the famous riwáya from Jábir al-Ansárí is not even referred to much less quoted in the "antitype". (Kulayní, Usúl vol 1, pp. 238-242) The text of what eventually came to be called The Hidden Words is, in fact, remarkable as a "Shi'í" religious work in that it is completely innocent of any of the sectarian or communalistic topics so familiar to the Sunní/Shí'í controversy. Rather this "Tablet of Fátima" is a collection of universalistic ethical and mystical aphorisms more akin to an Islamicate perennialism or universalism.

One of the few features that may be thought to link its contents to the Tablet of Fátima is the mention in it of the "chrysolite tablet" (alwáh zabarjadí) in the 63rd "Hidden Word" of the Persian (Kalimát, p. 83/94)

Well over fifty separate compositions having this designation are noticed and/or discussed in Taherzadeh (see bib). The earliest composition of Bahá'u'lláh's carrying this designation is probably the Lawh-i Kullu't-Ta`m

(Arabic), revealed shortly before the author went to Kurdistan in 1854 at the request of an Iranian Bábí. As with several of Bahá'u'lláh's compositions of this period (1853-1863) the style is abstruse, employing the allusive terminology found

throughout the writings of the Báb and the Shaykhíya, together with standard Sufi

technical terms. It is generally held that this Tablet was seen by Mírzá Yahyá

Subh-i Azal, the Báb's nominee, as a threat to his authority. Bahá'u'lláh went

into seclusion for two years as result of this disunity within the Baghdád refugee

Bábí community. In addition to the remarks by Taherzadeh (vol1, pp.000-000

see

Lambden and Masumian). Other important alwáh of the Baghdád Period are:

L. Húríyah, L. Áyat al-Núr (also known as the Tafsír Hurúfát

Muqatta`ah), L. Fitnah,

in honour of Shamsi Jihán, Fitnah, granddaughter of Fath `Alí Sháh, a close

friend of the remarkable Bábí heroine, Táhira; ; L. Ayyúb (also known as

the Súra-yi

Sabr); L. Bulbul-i Firáq, written on the even of his departure from Baghdád;

L.

Ghulám-i Khuld (Arabic & Persian), in celebration of "the year sixty"

(1260) when the young merchant, Mírzá `Alí Muhammad declared himself to

be the Báb; Lawh Malláhu'l-Quds (Arabic, Baghdad, 5th day of Naw Ruz, 1863

T228-44).

L. Madínat al-tawhíd.

The second period of the literary activity of Bahá'u'lláh

is 1863-68 Istanbul and Edirne, witnesses the revelation of the following: L.

Ahmad (Arabic, written for Ahmad Yazdí ca. 1865); L. Ahmad (Persian, for Ahmad

Káshání) L. Ashráf (for Ashráf Zanjání); L. Bahá' (after the "Most

Great

Separation" - in this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh refers to his own followers as

the "People of Bahá'" in contradistinction to the followers of his

half-brother,

Yahyá, Azal who henceforth would be recognized as either Bábí's, Bayánís

or Azalís.

This historic tablet was written for Khátún Ján, a faithful and heroic

follower

of Táhira and ardent supporter of Bahá'u'lláh. she was the daughter of

Hájí Asadu'lláh

Qazwíní whose home had been an important centre of Shaykhí then Bábí

activity.

L. Hawdaj, composed in the port of Sámúsun en route from Baghdád to Istanbul

and

therefore sometimes referred to as L.-i Samsun. Taherzadeh says that this was

probably the first tablet revealed by B. after his departure from Baghdád. It

is also known as the Súrah-yi Hawdaj. L. Khalíl 1; L. Layltu'l-Quds,

addressed

to one Darvísh Sidq `Alí; L. Napulyun I, first Tablet addressed to Napoleon

III

(unpublished); L. Nasír, to Nasír Qazwíní; L. Rúh; L. Salmán I; L.

Sayyáh; L.

Sarráj, book length epistle to `Alí Muhammad Sarráj-i Isfahání, a partisan

of

Yahyá; L. Sultán, Násir al-Dín Sháh, Arabic/Persian.

The third period, 1868-1877, L. Ahabáb; L. Fu'ád, on

the death of Fu'ád Pasha; L. Haft Pursish; L. Malik-i Rus, to Czar Alexander

II;

L. Malikah, to Queen Victoria; L. Manickchi Sáhib; L. Napulyun II (2nd Tab to Napoleon III (1869); L. Pap, to Pope Pious IX, 1869, Arabic; L. Písar-i `Amm; L. Qad ihtaraqa al-muklisún the "Fire Tablet" addressed to `Alí Akbar Dahají; L. Ra'ís, to `Ali Pasha (see Cole 200); L. Ridván; L. Ru'yá', for the anniversary of the birth of the Báb, summary of Tablets contents in Walbridge Sacred Acts, 161; L. Salmán II; L. Sayyid Mahdí-yi Dahají in Tablets 193-202; L. Tibb Arabic/Persian.

The fourth period, 1877-1892 saw the revelation of L. Asl-i Kull-i Khayr; L. Ishraqát, L. Aqdas, (not to be confused with the Kitáb-i Aqdas written during the second period, known as "Tablet to the Christians"; see Sours); L. Ard-i Bá' (viz. Beirut) written on the occasion of `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit there in 1879 at the invitation of Midhat Pasha; L. Bisharát; L. Burhán; L. Dunyá'; L. Hikmat (see Cole); L. Ibn-i Dhi'b, Bahá'u'lláh last book-length work written as an epistle to Shaykh Muhammad Taqí, Shaykh Najafí, son of Shaykh Muhammad Báqir Isfahání whom Bahá'u'lláh had stigmatized as "the wolf" because of the role he played in the killing of two brothers who were staunch Bahá'ís and prominent citizens of the city.

Of these titles, the major works designated lawh would include the Tablet to Nasír al-Dín Sháh, those to the other leaders, the Lawh-e Hekmat, the Lawh-i Ibn-i Dhi'b, the Tablet of the World, the Tablet of "All Food". As stated previously, the contents of these Tablets is so variegated that it is not possible to offer an analysis.

It may, however, be useful, particularly in the context of Bahai piety and spirituality, to bear in mind another meaning of the term lawh, viz luminosity or light. The nominal form lawh in addition to "tablet" or "slab" also means "shiny surface". Indeed, the masdar is glossed in Steingass as "Rising, appearing or shining (as the sun or a star)". The verbal form láhá and its derivatives denote "to appear," "to shine, shimmer" and "to allude". The plural of the etymologically related "lá'ih" — which functions as a title of the well-known mystical work (Jámí, q.v. and bib.) — means not only flashes, but flashes whose appearance should serve as guides to the wayfarer. So much of Bahai discourse is accented with references to "dawning," "appearance," "effulgence," "light," "clarity," "glory," and "guidance" that it is not unlikely that a word such as lawh which also carried in its semantic structure resonances of the word lá'ih,

in addition to the other meanings mentioned, would be seen as congenial, if not a perfect way to designate a religious teaching that was simultaneously old and new. Thus, holiness of provenance, permanence or timelessness, salvation, luminescence, divine guidance, eschatological fulfilment and epistle may all be understood by the use of the term as used to designate Bahai scripture.

The several compositions by `Abdu'l-Bahá' classed as "tablets" makes it difficult to say that the term is restricted to revelation, because technically `Abdu'l-Bahá' is not seen as a revelator, rather an interpreter (viz mobayyin). Among his most prominent alwáh are: Tablets of the Divine Plan, a cycle of letters written to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada between the years 1916-17 bearing instructions on how best to spread the Bahá'í teachings and establish communities of followers not only in North America, but around the world; the Tablet on Purity, enjoining cleanliness on the believers and strongly condemning the use of alcohol, opium and tobacco (Bahá'í World Faith, pp. 333-36); Lawh Hezár Baytî, and the Tablet to Dr August Forel, a lengthy discussion on what might be termed mystical philosophy. In addition, a 3-volume collection of his writings entitled Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá' was published in 1911 and 1915 (see bib). A good percentage of `Abdu'l-Bahá's — and indeed the leadership of the Bahai Faith in general — ministry may be described as epistolary. In this context, the charming story is told of how `Abdu'l-Bahá' in weary indulgence of his darling grandson, Showqi Effendi's childish pleading, composed for him his very own "Tablet" when he was 5 years old. (Rabbani, p.8)

With the exception of his Lawh-i Qarn and Lawh-i Saniy, (see bibliography), the term is not used to designate the compositions of `Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson and successor, known officially as the Guardian of the Cause of God (walí amr Alláh) Showqí Rabbání Shoghi Effendi (q.v.) Although, it should be observed that a similarly-charged term is used to designate his letters and other communiqués, viz tawqî/tawqî át (q.v.). This term is also used for letters by the Báb and, interestingly, seems not to have been used by Bahá'u'lláh. Current Bahai leadership, the Universal House of Justice (Bayt-e `Adl-e A`zam, q.v.), does not refer to any of its messages as alwáh, rather it communicates with the Bahai World and others through texts called dast-e khat, namá, payám and, again, tawqî .

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