Essays and Notes on Babi and Baha'i History

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Essays and Notes on Bábí and Bahá'í History

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published in Occasional Papers in Shaykhí, Bábí, and Bahá'í Studies6:1

East Lansing, MI: H-Bahai Digital Library, 2002-03

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Dedication

To my Baha’i friends,
from whom I received more than I gave

Preface

The Babi and Baha’i religions are historical religions, born in the full light of history, situating themselves in history, and drawing justification and inspiration from their own histories, the histories of the religions that

came before them, and the great historical events of their own times. Moreover, Baha'is share a sense that the stories of their three great leaders—the Bab and Bahaullah, their two prophets, and `Abd al-Baha, who began the process of making the Baha'i Faith into a world community—provide much of the meaning of the Baha'i Faith. The teachings of the Baha'i Faith, admirable though they are in themselves, find their context and power for the believers in the epic story of the religion and its founders. Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Bahaullah and the leader of the Baha'i Faith from 1921 to 1957 four times attempted to express the historical spirit of the Baha'i Faith: first in his translation of Nabil's Dawn-Breakers, by which he hoped to expose the Western Baha'is to the spirit of the Babis; second in The Promised Day Is Come, a sort of theodicy in which he correlated the events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the emergence of the Baha'i Faith; and finally in his two centennial histories of the Baha'i Faith, the English God Passes By and the Persian Lawh-i Qarn ("centennial tablet"). In recent years, the debates about methodology and authority that have riven the Baha'i academic community have almost always involved issues of historiography.

Baha'is and Babis have felt an obligation to preserve their history, in particular the stories of their martyrs, of the companions of their leaders, and of the early believers in each place. This, of course, has Islamic roots, since for cultural reasons of their own Muslims alone among the great civilizations have made the biographical dictionary a major literary and religious genre. The Western Baha'is brought a new direction to Baha'i historiography, the search for context. Unlike their Middle Eastern coreligionists, the Western Baha'is typically knew nothing about the cultural environment assumed in traditional Persian Baha'i historiography. They needed to understand the strange Arabic and Persian words and names, the Islamic practices referred to, and the places in which these events happened. This interest resulted at first in such things as glossaries and elementary introductions to Islam, written either by Middle Eastern Baha'is living in the West or by autodidact Western Baha'i scholars, then later in more ambitious interpretations of the Persian Baha'i scholarly tradition, such as the works of Adib Taherzadeh and especially Hasan Balyuzi. In the last generation, it has produced a school of genuine academic scholarship on the Baha'i Faith and a number of major works.

The present work belongs to a more modest school of Baha'i historiography than the works of Balyuzi and Shoghi Effendi: the historical miscellany. The following chapters collect a series of investigations, mostly biographical, of Babi and Baha'i history. Like the articles that comprise my Sacred Acts, Sacred Time, Sacred Space (Oxford: George Ronald, 1996), most were originally written for an encyclopedia on the Baha'i Faith that has not appeared. In some cases, as in the chapters on Zanjan and Turkey, they form a collected whole. In others, there is a looser connection. In some cases, despite my best efforts, the encyclopedic origin of the articles is painfully apparent, although I trust the information they contain will be useful to some readers and interesting or diverting to a few more. Some sections, like the account of

Iranian history and culture with which this volume begins and a later section on Ottoman Turkey, really are not about the Baha'i Faith at all, but are intended to provide intermediate background for readers familiar with Baha'i history but unfamiliar with the history and culture of the Middle East. As in my earlier work, my central operating principle is the belief that cultural context and detail illuminates Baha'i history. In general, I have written for an intelligent reader who is well read in the English literature of the Baha'i Faith but who does not have special knowledge of Iran, the Middle East, or Islam—for example, the reader who wishes to know more about the people mentioned in Bahaullah's last major work, The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. I have not tried to make the book or its constituent parts relevant to readers unfamiliar with the Baha'i Faith. Nonetheless, I think there is a fair amount here that will be of use to scholars who happen to want to know something about the history and thought of the Babis and Baha'is. The reaction to Sacred Acts encourages me to hope that the present work will be useful to some readers.

The transliteration system is, with slight modifications, the Library of Congress customarily used by scholars of Islam writing in English. It should be transparent enough to readers familiar with the slightly different system customarily used by Baha'is.

In sections on general topics, such as the chapter on Iranian history and culture with which this work begins, references are minimal and confined to documenting direct quotes and making suggestions for further reading. In sections representing specific research, I have given full documentation, although usually at the end of sections.

For the most part, the original articles were written between 1987 and 1991 and have not been revised. It would, of course, have been better to update them in the light of a considerable amount of primary and secondary material on the Babis and Baha'is that has appeared since, but that would have delayed their appearance further. I hope that in their present form they will spur others to new research.

Most of the articles that comprise the present work were written while I was an employee of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, and I wish to gratefully acknowledge the commitment of that body to the development of Baha'i scholarship. I also would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Baha'i World Centre, which supplied some of the source materials used in this work. I would also like to acknowledge the editors of the journal Iranian Studies, with whose permission I have used the article on Zanjan originally published there. I owe a great deal to my former colleagues on the Editorial Board of the Baha'i Encyclopedia, with whom I worked for eleven years, especially to Will. C. van den Hoonaard and B. Todd Lawson. Juan R. I. Cole has been a constant friend and source of information for many years, and I am particularly indebted to him for his assistance on the chapter relating to the Baha'i Faith in Turkey. It was also he who encouraged me to publish this material as a book through the H-Bahai web site. H-Bahai in turn

is part of the H-Net family of listservs and is underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities, who thus have underwritten the electronic publication of this work. Finally, I would like to thank my family, whose patience has been long tried by my scholarly interests, and particularly my wife Linda.

John Walbridge

Lahore

February 2001

Appendices

Arabic

The most important language of Bahá'í scripture is Arabic. The following is intended as an introduction to the language for those who encounter Arabic words in Bahá'í texts but who have no interest in learning the language.

History.

Arabic (Arab.: al-`Arabiyya, lughat al-`Arab, lisan al-`Arab; Pers.: Tazi) is the old language of central Arabia, the area that is now Saudi Arabia. It is now spoken in the Arab countries and used as a liturgical and learned language throughout the Islamic world. It was often used by the Bab, Bahaullah, and `Abd al-Baha, particularly for authoritative texts, prayers, and communications with Arab Bahá'ís.

Arabic is a member of the Semitic family. Thus it is closely related to many languages of the ancient Near East, notably Hebrew, and more distantly to ancient Egyptian and the Hamitic languages of North and West Africa. It is attested in names and fragments as early as the ninth century B.C.E. and preserves, perhaps because of its long isolation, an elaborate Semitic grammar already largely lost in biblical Hebrew. The Classical Arabic now used evolved in the sixth century in the poetry of central Arabia. It owes its importance to its use, with some elements of the Hijazi dialect, in the Qur'an.

After the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, Arabic gradually became the spoken language of the Islamic areas where other Semitic or Hamitic languages had formerly been spoken. Even in areas such as Iran and Turkey where other vernaculars remained in use, Arabic was the language of learning until the early twentieth century. In the Islamic world almost all works on religion or science were written in Arabic, and its vocabulary permeated the speech and writing of other Islamic languages. In

Persian, for example, almost any Arabic word could be used; and a Persian text on religion, philosophy, or science would often be almost indistinguishable from Arabic.

The increasing importance of Arabic led to a vast development in its vocabulary; but largely because of the prestige of the Qur'an the structure of the written language has not changed greatly since the time of Muhammad. An educated Arab can still read even pre-Islamic poetry without much difficulty. The spoken dialects have, however, changed considerably in the various Arab countries; but they have rarely developed into independent written languages. Classical Arabic is still normally spoken in formal situations such as university lectures, political speeches, and broadcasting.

Structure.

Like other Semitic languages Arabic is based on meaningful roots of three consonants. These roots can be combined with vowels and other consonants in several hundred forms, each of which has a particular meaning. The root K.T.B., for example, has to do with writing; and when used with the simple active participle form c1ac2ic3, becomes katib, meaning "writer" or "scribe." C1ic2ac3 is an infinitive form; hence kitab means "writing" or "book." Kataba means "he wrote," mukatabah "correspondence," maktub "letter," and so on. Word forms commonly seen in English texts are usually nouns or adjectives (the two are not strictly distinguished in Arabic) and include:

c1ac2ic3: active participle: Nasir ("victorious") ??

mac1c2uc3: passive participle: Mahbub ("beloved"); Majnun ("possessed by jinn" or "mad"); Maqsud ("Desired One").

c1ac2c3: noun: `Abd ("servant" or "slave").

There are only two verb tenses in Arabic, perfect and imperfect, each of which may refer to past, present, or future. Thus time is not so precisely defined as in English (cf. Bahaullah, Iqan

115).

Arabic has a set of consonants different from English, some of which are nearly impossible for an English speaker to pronounce. In Bahá'í contexts Arabic

words are usually pronounced with the Persian accent.

Arabic in the Bahá'í writings.

Many of the Bab's works are written in Arabic—works written in Qur'anic style, works on theology and law, commentaries on the Qur'an, and the like. The Bab's Arabic works pose many difficulties, not only because of their abstrusity, but also because of their vocabulary and complex sentence structure. The Bab's enemies criticized his grammar and accused him of ignorance of the most elementary rules of the language; he was supposedly asked to conjugate qala ("to say"), an exercise for a schoolchild, and to have been unable to do so. In fact, the difficulty was that the Bab was unwilling to accept the limitations of conventional Arabic grammar and style and frequently used nonstandard derived forms of words. While theoretically there are a large number of words derivable from any Arabic root, in fact only a small number are used. The Bab used many more unknown in Arabic (for example, most of the 360 words derived from baha' that he included in a famous tablet.) The effect is a style intense, unorthodox, challenging, and sometimes obscure. The Bab himself claimed that his verses and their beauty were testimony to the truth of his revelation. (Bab, Selections:45, 109; Bab, Haykal al-Din 141; Bab, Persian Bayan

2:1, 7:2.)

Although most of Bahaullah's writings are in Persian, many of the most important are in Arabic, and Arabic passages are often found in tablets to educated Persians—the Arabic tending to be more formal, the Persian more intimate. Bahaullah often used Arabic when he was addressing the world or writing something of universal relevance: the Kitab-i Aqdas is in Arabic, as are the tablets to the Kings, the obligatory prayers, the marriage vows, and the prayers of fasting and burial.

Bahaullah wrote a clean and elegant Arabic, relatively free of both the unorthodox elements of the Bab's style and the excessive decorativeness of his contemporaries' literary Arabic. (Much the same was true of his Persian style.) He generally wrote in rhymed prose (saj`) in a style reminiscent of the Qur'an, but somewhat simpler and without archaic elements. His style is austere, concise, and elevated—well translated by the King James English commonly used in Bahá'í translations of his writings. Bahaullah's grammar and usage is sometimes influenced by Persian, as is usual in Arabic written by Iranians. For this reason Bahaullah was

occasionally criticized for not writing pure Arabic. Late in his life he initiated a project to collect and edit his own writings; one of the things that was done was to eliminate some of the "Babi-ism" characteristic of his early Arabic writings.

Generally, Bahaullah expresses Himself in terms familiar to his reader, often using technical terms from the Islamic religious sciences, the Qur'an, and Islamic mystical philosophy.

Though `Abd al-Baha was completely fluent in Arabic (he spent most of his life in Arab countries) and wrote many tablets in Arabic, the bulk of his works are in Persian. His Arabic style was of a high order, but somewhat more complex and conventional than his father's.

Shoghi Effendi also knew Arabic well and often used Arabic elements in his Persian writings, but he generally did not write in Arabic.

Other Arabic Bahá'í Literature.

A good deal of Bahá'í literature has been published in the Arab countries, especially in Egypt: Arabic Bahá'í sacred writings, translations of English and Persian works, and native Bahá'í literature. Egypt was a principal center of Bahá'í publishing in the early twentieth century. More recently, the Lebanese Bahá'í community has published a number of books in Arabic. The Universal House of Justice uses English in its communications with the Arab communities.

Sources

For a general account of the Arabic language, see EI2, s.v. "al-'Arabiya." On Arabic in Iran see EIr, s.v. "Arabic." The classic popular introduction to Arabic literature is R. A. Nicolson, A Literary History of the Arabs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907).

Shaykh Abu-Mansur Ahmad b. `Ali b. Abi-Talib Tabarsi was the twelfth century Shi`i scholar whose tomb near Barfurush was the scene of the most important battle between the Babis and government troops in 1848–49. Shaykh Tabarsi—not to be confused with his contemporary al-Fadl b. Hasan Tabarsi, the author of a famous commentary on the Qur'an—was one of the teachers of the Shi`i biographer, Ibn Shahrashub. He was best known for the Kitab al-Ihtijaj, a collection of the traditions in which the Prophet and the Imams used

arguments.

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Majlisi, Bihar 0:140. Tihrani, al-Dhari`ah 1:281–82. Amin, A`yan 3:29–30. The identification of the tomb with this man is made by the tablet of visitation in the tomb. See Brown, 617.

Abbreviations

EB = Encyclopaedia Britannica

EI1 = Encyclopaedia of Islam. 1st edition

EI2 = Encyclopaedia of Islam. 2nd edition

EIr = Encyclopaedia Iranica

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