

Hidden Words, also known as Book of Fatimih: Tablet stu

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Name of Tablet in Arabic or Persian:

"Kalimát-i-Maknúnih" or

"Sahífiy-i-Fatimiyyih"

Translation into English:

Originally "The Hidden Book of Fatimih," and

later "The Hidden Words." Also sometimes referred to simply as "The Book of Fatimih." See below.

There have been more translations of the Hidden Words than of any other Bahá'í text. E.G. Browne first translated parts of it for his rendition of A Traveller's Narrative in 1891; Ibráhím Kheiralla translated the entire text in 1894 and 1900; Amin Fareed trans. and published it in 1905; a Mrs. Stannard rendered it in English in 1921; and Shoghi Effendi translated it in a few drafts: the first in 1923, the second in 1924, the third in 1925, the fourth in 1929, with a final revision in 1954.

For discussion of the Hidden Words, see Diana Malouf, *Unveiling the Hidden Words* (George Ronald, 1997), and also her article "The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh: Translation Norms Employed by Shoghi Effendi," in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi* (ABS, 1993); E.G. Browne, original trans. of *Traveller's Narrative*, 122-126; and Franklin Lewis' "Scripture as Literature," available only online, at Baháí-library.org/conferences/scripture.lit.html. David Hofman discusses George Townshend's role in the authorized translation in his book *George Townshend*, pp. 56-59 and 78-79.

Significance of Name:

The Hidden Words was known as the "Hidden Book of Fatimih," (Sahífiyyih-Maknúníyh-Fatimiyyih) until around the mid-1860s, at which time it came to be referred to simply as the "Hidden Words." In the *Lawh-i-Sultán* (Tablet to the King of Persia), from 1867, Bahá'u'lláh quotes four Persian Hidden Words and states that these are from a work which "was" known as "Sahífiyyih-Maknúníyh-Fatimiyyih" but "these days" is called "Kalimát-i-Maknúnih" (Hidden Words).

For many reasons which are beyond the scope of this note, Shiism has long held strong beliefs in two layers of meaning in Sacred Writings, the "exoteric" (zahir) and the "esoteric" or "hidden" (batin). The former are the outer essentials of religion and theological explanations for the masses, and especially the non-Shii Muslims. The "hidden" teachings are those only known to the truest Muslims, the Shiis and especially the Shii Imáms. (Much discussion of this can be found in *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, by Mohammad Alí Amir-Moezzi,

and also in a paper I wrote, "The Shi'i Qur'an," online at Bahá'i-library.org/personal/jw/my.papers/.) This, then, is one possible meaning of "hidden," the fact that Bahá'u'lláh is now revealing teachings which previously had been reserved for the spiritual elite.

The academic consensus, supported even by much Shi'i consensus, is that the Book of Fatimih is mythical; even 'Abdu'l-Bahá admitted that it did not really exist. As a myth, however, its history and meaning was clear. The sixth Imám of Shiism, Ja'far al-Sadiq, relates that, when Muhammad's daughter Fatimih — the wife of the first Imám Alí and mother of Imám Husayn — was grieving Muhammad's death, an angel visited her with words of comfort. This angel is often said to be Gabriel and, since Gabriel was the bearer of the annunciation to Mary, mother of Jesus, and to Muhammad, he represents divine revelation and the Book of Fatimih would thus have come from God. Fatimih mentioned this to Ali, who advised that she record everything Gabriel told her (or, in some versions, wrote it down himself). The resulting Book of Fatimih is unlike the Qur'an in that it contained more mystical and prophetic teachings, and was said to be 17,000 verses, almost three times the size of the Qur'an. The subsequent Imáms were the only ones who had possession of the book and, by extension, anyone who had the book was the Imám (this is important). In 874, though, the last Imám disappeared and became "occulted," or "hidden." Within a short time, Shiis ("Twelver" Shiis only) began to believe that the Hidden Imám would one day return as the "Qa'im," or "Mahdi," and bring the Day of Judgment and the end of time. When he came, one of the proofs he would have of his identity would be that he would possess the hidden Book of Fatimih. As well, he would prove his authority by revealing the hidden, secret meanings of all previous religious texts (sound familiar?!).

A further significance has far-reaching ramifications. The exact meanings of terms like "Báb," "Mahdi," and "Qa'im" are difficult to determine and, even though the Báb was technically the Báb/Mahdi/Qa'im, Bahá'u'lláh also represents certain aspects of each. The Shii audience would have been expecting the Mahdi to authenticate His revelation by, among other things, revealing the "hidden" meanings of previous religions and possessing the Hidden Book of Fatimih. Thus, when Bahá'u'lláh gave His book that title, the significance could not have escaped His audience, for the very act of composing a book by that title was to make an indirect claim, not just to Prophethood, but to the very abrogation of the rule of the Ulama! 'Abdu'l-Bahá also points out this significance, saying that Bahá'u'lláh "willed to make known the appearance of the Qa'im by intimation and implication; therefore was it mentioned in this manner for a wise reason which He had" (quoted in Malouf, diss. version of Unveiling..., 95 [trans. Browne?]).

While it would have been clear that the Hidden Words was not

literally meant to be the Book of Fatimih, for it was much shorter and did not contain some of the things that Fatimih's was said to contain, the title alone would have been enough to make some people wonder. It is not clear how many people made the connection, since this was 5 years before His private declaration and 10 years before His public one, but in retrospect we can see the great significance this title has.

Tablet was revealed in:
Arabic and Persian

Reason for Revelation of the Tablet:

Bahá'u'lláh gives four reasons for the revelation of the work in the preface to the Arabic section: "This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, [1] as a token of grace unto the righteous, [2] that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, [3] may fulfill in their lives His trust, [4] and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue." Taherzadeh also gives as a reason that: "The chief aim of Bahá'u'lláh in The Hidden Words is to detach man from this mortal world and to protect his soul from its greatest enemy, himself" (p. 75).

Date of Revelation:

Taherzadeh writes that it was revealed in 1858, with certain passages being added later. On page 98 of George Latimer's pilgrim's notes, The Light of the World (1920), the following unauthenticated quotation is found: The question was asked, "When and where was the Hidden Words revealed and why was it called hidden?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered: "At first it was concealed. It was not circulated. It was revealed at Baghdad towards the ends of our stay there. It was not given to anyone. There were not more than two or three copies of it. It was at a time when all the enemies were attacking us. The Sháh of Persia was oppressing and the Ottoman government was also oppressing us. At such a time they were revealed."

Place of Revelation:

Baghdad, while pacing the banks of the Tigris River

Role of Amanuensis or Secretary:

Many students have written that there was an amanuensis who recorded the Hidden Words as they were revealed. I have found no mention of a role of an amanuensis. If you have found evidence, please tell me where.

Other Tablets revealed at about the same time:

Numerous tablets were revealed during this, the middle to late Baghdad

period, such as the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, the many tablets studied in Week One, and numerous mystical Tablets such as the Tablet of the Maiden. John Hatcher also gives a list in *The Ocean of His Words*, p.380.

Style, Subject, and Genre:

Style: Tablets with the tone of command and authority. Townshend's introduction says that the Arabic Hidden Words are "more simple, direct, definite, ethical" exhortations, mostly addressed to individuals, while the Persian ones are longer, "personal, appealing, mystical, poetical" and often addressed to groups.

Subject: The Hidden Words encompass a number of subjects. While the main ones are "Tablets exhorting men to education, goodly character and divine virtues" and "Tablets dealing with social teachings," some also "concern matters of government and world order" and at least one, the Persian #77, is "Mystical." Shoghi Effendi also calls it "ethical," saying that the Hidden Words has the position of "unsurpassed preeminence among the...ethical writings of [Bahá'u'lláh]" (*God Passes By*, 140).

Genre: It can be said to be an "Essay or book, not revealed to a specific person," but is more clearly a kind of rhymed prose akin to poetry called "saj`," which is the same style of most of the Qur'an. But, since it isn't wholly saj`, there really is no clear genre in all of Arabic-Persian literary tradition into which the Hidden Words falls; it is a unique literary form.

Voice of Tablet: [?]

While most of the Hidden Words is clearly in the voice of God ("O My Servants"), there are places in which it sounds as if Bahá'u'lláh is addressing us more from the human vantage point.

Outline Contents of Tablet (if possible)

The contents are perhaps best summarized by Taherzadeh on p. 72:

"This marvelous collection of heavenly counsels and admonitions can be described as a perfect guide-book for man on his journey to the spiritual worlds of God...The Hidden Words not only sets out the provisions of this universal and everlasting Covenant which binds man to his Creator, but also demonstrates the way in which he can be faithful to it."

Principal themes of the Tablet:

Diana Malouf, in the dissertation version of *Unveiling...*, writes "Thematically, numerous strands wind themselves intricately though the broader tapestry. They are like an arabesque, interwoven, recombined, weaving in and out without an abrupt beginning or end. Some stanzas in proximity address a certain theme, such as love (A 3-

10), faultfinding (A 26-29), death (A 31-34), martyrdom (A 45-57), or tribulation (A 48-53). However, in stanzas dealing ostensibly with a subject, other themes enter and are picked up and then disappear and appear later, in another stanza, composing a rich texture....The work resists [thematization; it] is far too complex" (diss., 57-58).

One student has also drawn up a useful four-part typology:

1. Commands on heavenly virtues
2. Commands on earthly virtues
3. Descriptions of heavenly virtues or verities
4. Descriptions of earthly virtues or verities

Comment on the Tablet's relationship to any other tablets:

The Hidden Words mentions two other tables, the "fifth Tablet of Paradise" and the "Ruby Tablet," both of which Abdu'l-Bahá says have not yet been revealed. After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Shoghi Effendi ranks the Hidden Words second only to the Kitáb-i-Íqán in importance. (God Passes By, 140)

As well, the Hidden Words can be related to all other dispensations by the statement which it opens with, "This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity..." It is thus a distillation of the teachings from all previous dispensations.

— Hidden Words, also known as Book of Fatimih: Tablet study outline (Used by permission of the curator)