Scripture as Literature: Sifting through the layers of the text

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Abstract: This paper attempts to trace the genres and styles of various parts of the corpus of Bahá’í scripture to antecedent models in Judeo-Christian and Islamic sacred texts, as well as in Persian and Arab literary texts. It argues that knowledge of the specific scriptural or literary models appealed to by certain Bahá’í texts will provide a deeper understanding of the theological import of those texts. Furthermore, because more is known about the literary milieu in which Bahá’u’lláh’s texts were revealed, studying the intersection of Bahá’í scripture and its literary background may help illuminate, by way of comparison, the literary influences which gave shape to the form and style of the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels and the Qur’an.

Blessed Echoes

In the mid-14th Century AD, the Italian poet Petrarch wrote of his courtly love for Laura (from Sonnet No.47):

Bendetto sia’l giorno e’l mese et l’anno
e la stagione e’l tempo et l’ora e’l punto
e’l bel paese e’l loco ov’lo fuit giunto
da’duo begli occhi che legato m’ànno

Every English-speaking Bahá’í child will find these lines of Petrarch, once rendered into English, have a remarkably familiar ring:

Blessed be the day and the month and the year
and the season and the time and the hour
and the instant and the beautiful countryside
and the place where I was struck by the two
lovely eyes that have bound me.[2]

A Bahá’í reader will hear echoes of a prayer attributed to Bahá’u’lláh[3] which shares a parallel rhetorical structure and even some of the imagery of a passage adorning the title page of the common English-language Bahá’í prayer book:[4]

Blessed is the spot, and the house,
and the place, and the city,
and the heart, and the mountain,
and the refuge, and the cave,
and the valley, and the land,
and the sea, and the island,
and the meadow where mention
of God hath been made,
and His praise glorified
This uncanny resemblance is in all likelihood a mere coincidence, but it highlights the essential poetic or literary quality of the prayers, letters, treatises and books written by Mirzâ Husayn-‘Alî Nûrî (1817-92), known to history as Bahá’u’lláh. Bahá’ís, of course, believe that Bahá’u’lláh was a Manifestation (zuhûr), or major prophet, of God and that the corpus of his writings constitute a revelation (wahy) from God. Among the community of his followers, this speech is endowed with supernatural qualities and therefore enjoys sacred status as scripture. Nevertheless, there is the recognition that the Manifestation must pour divine truth into a particular form, shaped by the vessel of language in which it is contained, which in the case of Bahá’u’lláh’s scripture happens to be Arabic and Persian. This paper will attempt to uncover some of the particular literary models which Bahá’u’lláh has chosen as the frame of expression for his revelation or scripture.

Scripture versus literature

Christians have worried for several centuries about the relationship between pagan literature and scripture and the confluence of both the Jewish and the pagan Hellenistic traditions in the formation of Christian culture. Konrad of Hirsau, who died about 1150 AD, recounts that a pupil once asked a teacher to prove that it is not harmful to study the pagan Latin and Greek authors and poets, whereupon the teacher replied:

Would you reject the writings of Moses and the Prophets because in places they borrow words and expressions from pagan writers? Have I not already told you that all that is true that has ever been said by any human beings or all that is correct that has ever been thought has come from Him Who created us?[5]

In the Islamic context, the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur’ân, l’jâz al-Qur’ân, began to take shape in the 10th century AD, with Arab theologians and rhetoricians holding to the notion that the Qur’ân itself was a miracle, either because of its contents or because God prevented Muhammad's contemporaries from composing a stylistically similar work. Indeed, the word âyat, or verse of scripture, is the same word as that used for a divine sign or miracle. The Qur’ân came to be seen as an uncreated work, the exact words of which were recorded in a heavenly tablet (lawh mahfûz), which was so lofty in its phrasing and its content that mere mortals could not imitate it.[6] There is some justification for this view in the Qur’ân itself, but it seems clear that Muhammad himself recognized the roots of his rhyming prose style (sa‘j) in the prognostications of sooth-sayers (kâhin, kuhhân) and the considerable body of stories about Moses, Abraham, Jesus and the other Semitic prophets from Biblical and Midrashic sources and from Arab folklore. The particular form and expression of the truths of the Qur’ân, therefore, is indebted to the literary milieu in which it was revealed, though Muhammad frequently points out that the revelation of the Qur’ân is not to be confused with the mere speech of poets, soothsayers and storytellers.

In the Bahá’í context, we do not find exact parallel to the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur’ân. The Báb, criticized by the Shiite clergy for his occasional failure to conform to the expected norms of Arabic grammar, replied this way in the First Chapter of the Second Vâhed of the Persian Bayân:

va agar nokte-gin dar e’râb-e qarâ’at yâ qavâ’ed-e ‘arabiye shavad, mardud ast zirâ ke in qavâ’ed az âyât bar dâshte mi-shavad na âyât bar ânhâ jâri mi-shavad

And if exception be taken on the basis of vocalization of the text [e’râb-e qarâ’at denotes how the short vowels, not written down in Arabic script, are pronounced, which affects issues of conjugation and declension] or the rules of Arabic grammar, it is groundless, for such rules are derived from revealed verses, nor do revealed verses flow forth according to them.[7]

Indeed, Arab grammarians of the eighth to tenth century AD cited the Qur’anic text as an authority for unusual grammatical formations, as it was by then considered matchlessly eloquent and a touchstone text to exemplify correct Arabic usage. The Báb, therefore, suggests in the above passage that, instead of criticizing his grammar, his readers should look to the status of the Bayân as revelation from God, and, as such, its grammar should not be criticized but emulated. Also in the First Chapter of the Second Vâhed of the Persian Bayân, the Báb alludes to the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur’ân:

khodâvand Qur’ân râ be-a’lã ‘olovv-e fesâhat nâzel farmud va u râ mo’jze-ye Rasul Allâh qarâ’ dâd...khodâvand-e ‘âlam kalemât-e qor’âniye râ be-sha’nî nâzel farmude ke agar mâ ’alá al-arz jam’ shavand va be-khwâhand âye dar moqâbel-e âyât-e qor’ân biâvarand, nemitavânand[8]

The Lord revealed the Qur’ân in the utmost perfection of eloquence and established it as a miracle of the Messenger of God...the Lord of the World sent down the Qur’anic words in such manner that should all who are on earth gather together in the desire to produce a verse comparable to the verses of the Qur’ân, they could not do so.

This test of inimitability or the miraculous quality of revealed language is also applied to the Bayân, citing as proof of its divine origin the fact that a thousand lines (bayt) are revealed by the pen of the Báb in the space of five hours, so quickly in fact that the scribe can barely take them down.[9]
There are several reasons I propose that we should consider Bahá'u'lláh's revealed works in this light:

In this Revelation the Lord of the universe hath deigned to bestowed His mighty utterances and resplendent signs upon the Point of the Bayán, and hath ordained them as His matchless testimony for all created things. Were all the people that dwell on earth to assemble together, they would be unable to produce a single verse like unto the ones which God hath caused to stream forth from the tongue of the Point of the Bayán. Indeed, if any living creature were to pause to meditate he would undoubtedly realize that these verses are not the work of man, but are solely to be ascribed unto God, the One, the Peerless, Who causeth them to flow forth from the tongue of whomsoever He willeth, and hath not revealed nor will He reveal them save through the Focal Point of God's Primal Will. He it is, through Whose dispensations divine Messengers are raised up and heavenly Books are sent down. Had human beings been able to accomplish this deed surely someone would have brought forth at least one verse during the period of twelve hundred and seventy years which hath elapsed since the revelation of the Qur'án until that of the Bayán. However, all men have proved themselves impotent and have utterly failed to do so, although they endeavoured, with their vehement might, to quench the flame of the Word of God.\(^{(10)}\)

Though Bahá'u'lláh occasionally echoes this idea, and Shoghi Effendi does make a similar point about the speed with which Bahá'u'lláh revealed his books and tablets - just two days and two nights in the case of the Kitáb-i-Iqân - there is no fixed doctrine of Bahá'u'lláh's writings as inimitable. In a letter dated 13 May 1953, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian and authorized interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, describes Bahá'u'lláh's teachings as having "matchless potency,"\(^{(11)}\) and elsewhere speaks in passing of "His matchless utterance,"\(^{(12)}\) but he has also called Táhirih's poems "matchless"\(^{(13)}\) and evaluated the Kitáb-i-Iqán, as did E.G. Browne before him, in terms of its literary qualities. The Guardian writes:

> A model of Persian prose, of a style at once original, chaste and vigorous, and remarkably lucid, both cogent in argument and matchless in its irresistible eloquence, this Book, setting forth in outline the Grand Redemptive Scheme of God, occupies a position unequalled by any work in the entire range of Bahá'í literature, except the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book.\(^{(14)}\)

In this description, Shoghi Effendi concurs with E.G. Browne's high estimation of the Iqán in his *A Literary History of Persia* Browne hailed the Iqán as a model representative of the neo-classical "Return" movement (bâz-gasht) in 19th century Persian literature, which aspired to the simplicity and concision of pre-Mongol Persian prose. In contrast to the "flabby, inflated, bombastic style" characterized by much of the intervening period, Browne gives high praise to the Iqán:

> Yet simplicity and directness is to be found in modern as well as in ancient writers of Persian verse and prose; the Iqán ("Assurance") of the Bábís, written by Bahá'u'lláh about AD 1859, is as concise and strong in style as the Chahár Maqála, composed some seven centuries earlier.\(^{(15)}\)

**Scripture as Literature**

In the comments that follow, I would like to explore the intersection of literature and scripture a bit further, approaching the writings of Bahá'u'lláh as revealed texts in dialogue with the literary traditions of Iran and the Arab world. There is nothing new in this approach to scripture; for over a century, scholars have attempted to understand the various books of the Hebrew Bible, such as the wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, the liturgical literature used at temple services found in the Psalms, etc., in terms of their genres or forms. Form criticism, like many other modern approaches to the Bible, was pioneered by Germans who attempted to identify the genre, or "Gattung," to which specific books of the Bible conform, as well as the real-life context or purpose, "sitz-im-leben," to which they respond. As John Barton defines it:

> A Gattung or genre is a conventional pattern, recognizable by certain formal criteria (style, shape, tone, particular syntactic or even grammatical structures, recurring formulaic patterns), which is used in a particular society in social contexts which are governed by certain formal conventions.\(^{(16)}\)

By knowing the genre and social purpose of a particular passage of scripture (was it a personal letter, public sermon, liturgical text, etc.), one might gain insight into the framework of expectations an ancient reader brought to that particular text and thereby better understand what it might originally have meant to her.

There are several reasons I propose that we should consider Bahá'u'lláh's revealed works in this light:

1. By placing Bahá'u'lláh's works in their historical and literary context and understanding what generic conventions they follow or break, we can better understand what they meant in their original context and what they might mean for us today.

2. Read as a philosophical or spiritual genre of literature, as many secular non-believing people now read the Bible or the Qur'án, several of the works of Bahá'u'lláh are of a literary quality that ought to secure for them a place in the pantheon of 19th century Persian and Arabic literature.

3. Because we possess a large body of texts and other documentary evidence about the literary and theological traditions of 19th century Iran, we know much more about the literary matrix from which Bahá'u'lláh's revelatory texts were born than we
do about the literary milieu in which the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'án appeared. By tracing how Bahá'u'lláh's writings have incorporated and reworked the prevailing literary and theological traditions of his day into scripture, we may come to better understand the process of moulding a scriptural tradition from a literary tradition and discover comparative models or data that may illuminate the shaping of the styles the Bible and the Qur'án assumed.

God's logos, man's lingo

A theological objection was, of course, raised to the method of form criticism in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Whereas literature is a human product, and human authors are obviously influenced by the literary history that proceeds them, God (as speaker of the Qur'án, for example) is unconstrained by such human limitations.(17) However, a theological response to this would be that by choosing to speak in human language (rather than, let's say, by intuition or visual signs) the infinite accepts the constraints and limitations of human readers, and must perforce accommodate itself to human literary and linguistic conventions. If it failed to do so, it could not be understood. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh, himself, operates on this very assumption, explaining that divine Revelation assumes a form other than its pure state in order that mortal beings may understand. For example, from his Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

These words are to your measure, not to God's. To this testifieth that which is enshrined within His knowledge, if ye be of them that comprehend; and to this the tongue of the Almighty doth bear witness, if ye be of those who understand. I swear by God, were We to lift the veil, ye would be dumbfounded. (18)

The word lānh, which essentially means "tune" or "melody," is translated by Shoghi Effendi, in his capacity as Guardian and authorized interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, in its second occurrence in this passage as "the melody of My voice" and in the first instance as "understanding." Thus, revelation, in what amounts to a normative statement of Bahá'í doctrine, is seen as a melody or language or accent, as it were, comparable to the language of mankind, not to that of God, and therefore obviously susceptible to the influences of human forms of speech.

Scripture quoting scripture

That Bahá'u'lláh was familiar and conversant with the literary history of Persian and Arabic is abundantly clear from even a cursory examination of his writings. He makes references to lines of verse from a number of Persian poets and makes ample and powerful use of the symbols of his literary tradition. Though not formally educated in a madrese, Bahá'u'lláh was tutored at home and was familiar with his culture, which was and continues to be heavily influenced by its literary and specifically poetic heritage. Thus, although Bahá'u'lláh states that "we perused not the books which men possess and we acquired not the learning current amongst them," nevertheless, he explicitly tells us in the Lawh-i-hikmat (Tablet of wisdom):

whenever we desire to quote the sayings of the learned and of the wise, presently there will appear before the face of Thy Lord in the form of a tablet all that which hath appeared in the world and is revealed in the Holy Books and Scriptures. Thus do We set down in writing that which the eye perceiveth,(21)

The Bahá'u'lláh's writings, much of which have yet to be published, are believed to number about 15,000 documents, including prayers, letters, epistles, tablets and books in Persian and Arabic, all of which are regarded as divinely revealed scripture. For the purposes of this paper (and following the periodization of Qur'anic verses as Meccan or Medinan), Bahá'u'lláh's writings can be broadly divided into two periods: the first from his imprisonment in 1852 through the end of his stay in Baghdad; and the second from the public announcement of his claim to be a Manifestation of God in 1863 to the end of his life in 1892. The latter period includes among other categories, tablets proclaiming to the kings, rulers and clergy of Europe and Islamdom the advent of his Revelation; the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, a book which establishes new laws for the Bahá'í community, abrogating much of the Islamic and Bábí shar'á; and a series of tablets and epistles variously called lawh, sūra, risāla, which outline his blueprint for collective international security and world government.
This last category does not have a strong Islamic prototype - indeed, it appeals more to the spirit of the 1815 Congress of Vienna and Immanuel Kant's 1795 tractate *Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Sketch (Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf)* than to Islamic tradition. However, it ought to be mentioned in this context that Abu al-Fazl (1551-1602), the vizier of the Moghul emperor Akbar, in his court history *Akbar-nâme* includes the phrases *solh-e koll*, meaning tolerance for all and being at peace with all others, and *mahabbat-e koll*, meaning universal love in which the welfare of all people, irrespective of their religion is fostered, which seem to presage Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the lesser and most great peace (*solh-e asghar, solh-e akbar*).

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, on the other hand, is clearly conceived as being in the genre of previous scriptures - the greater Book of the people of the Book, particularly the *Qur'án* - which it mirrors stylistically by jumping from one subject to another, sometimes without apparent logical order. Bahá'u'lláh's tablets to the rulers of the world, meanwhile, clearly appeal to the tradition preserved by Ibn Ishâq, the biographer of Muhammad, that the Prophet sent emissaries to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, the Persian Shah, Khosrow, and various Arab potentates calling them to Islam.

Certain phrases can be seen to have Biblical literary precedents, such as Bahá'u'lláh's frequent:

\[
\text{bude va hast va khwâhad bud} \\
\text{as it was, is and ever shall be} \\
\]

which recalls *Revelations* IV:8:

\[
\text{Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.} \\
\]

or the *Gloria Patri* in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

\[
\text{Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.} \\
\]

There is likewise the despairing lament of Bahá'u'lláh's "Fire Tablet" (*qad ihtaraq al-mukhlisûn*), "How long...," which also occurs in similar contexts approximately thirty times in the Psalms, e.g., Psalm 6:4 and Psalm 13. Then whole sentences are sometimes borrowed from the Hebrew or the Arabic translations of the Bible with which Bahá'u'lláh would have been familiar, such as Psalm 51:12, which in the King James Version reads: "Create in me a clean heart, o God and renew a right spirit within me," which is, of course, simply an older (and to my ear, inferior) translation of the Guardian's rendering of one of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers:

\[
\text{Create in me a pure heart, O my God, and renew} \\
\text{a tranquil conscience within me, O my Hope!} \\
\]

**Bahá'u'lláh's writ and its literary matrix**

It is not surprising that the motifs and stylistics of scripture would find their way into Bahá'u'lláh's writings; after all, he sees his writings as a new chapter in the book of scripture. Perhaps somewhat less expected, though, are quotations from the works of poets, mystics and philosophers which punctuate Bahá'u'lláh's writings, in typical epistolary style, especially in the early period of 1853-1863. Unlike Muhammad, revelation seems to have come at will to Bahá'u'lláh; even though his revelations, considered as divinely revealed or sent down (*manzul*), apparently differed from normal speech or thought, some passages speak in the voice of God and others in Bahá'u'lláh's own voice. Nevertheless, all are accorded the status of revelation, even those texts dating to the period before Bahá'u'lláh's public claim to be a Manifestation.

The earliest text in Bahá'u'lláh's corpus seems to be a nineteen-line Persian poem in the Sufi tradition entitled*Rashh-e 'amâ* (*Sprinklings form the Cloud of Unknowing*) dating to 1269/1852-3, which contains the refrain (*radif*) "it pours from us" (*-e mâ mi-rizad*), as in the opening line:

\[
rashh-e 'amâ az jazbe-ye mâ mi-rizad \\
\]

From our rapture the sprinkles of the cloud of unknowing trickle down.

Persian poets prior to Bahá'u'lláh, from the Safavid period onward, had used this refrain, as in the last line of the following poem by Sâ'eb (1607-1675):

\[
\text{mi-shavad da'vi-ye khun ruz-e qiâmat Sâ'eb} \\
\text{rang-e har gol ke ze nazzâre-ye mâ mi-rizad} \\
\]

There will be a bloody fight on the day of Judgement, Sâ'eb

over the colour of every rose that fades under our gaze.

A 217-line poem in Arabic, complete with auto-commentary bearing the Persian title*Qaside-ye varqâ'Iye* (*The Dove Ode*) was
written between 1270-1272/1854-6 for a certain Shaykh Ismâ’îl, the head of the Khalidiya branch of the Naqshbandi Sufis, who had made Bahá’u’lláh’s acquaintance in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, and, being impressed with his piety and knowledge, requested him to write a qasida in imitation of the famous “Tâ’îyat al-kubrâ,” or Magnificent Ode rhyming in “Ti,” by Ibn al-Fârid (576-632/1181-1235), composed 600 years earlier. In such poems, Bahá’u’lláh incorporates Bábí theology and a measured Sufi vocabulary which steers away from the monism or pantheism of both wahdat al-shuhûd and wahdat al-wujûd (“oneness of Being and Manifestation”) varieties without making a contentious doctrinal issue of it.

Throughout their ministries, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and also Shoghi Effendi wrote a great number of personal confessional prayers (monâjât), a genre of Persian prose canonized by the eleventh century Sufi of Herat, ‘Abd Allâh Ansâri (1006-1088 AD). In some Bahá’í monâjât (also called do’â, as opposed to obligatory prayers, or namâz) the echoes of quotations or near-quotations from earlier Islamic prayers or poems can occasionally be heard, for example, in the prayer-like tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá beginning "Ay jân leshân-e yâr-e bi-neshân," which quotes a line of verse from the famous 13th century poet of Shiraz, Sa’dî:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hakim Sanâ’i ‘alayhe al-rahmat gofte:} \\
\text{pand girid ay siâhi-tân gerelte já-ye pand} \\
\text{pand girid ay sepid-i-tân damide bar ‘edhár}
\end{align*}
\]

The sage Sanâ’i has said:

Take counsel, all you more blackened than counselled!

Take counsel, o you whose beards begin to whiten!

According to the modern edition of his collected poems (Divân), the second hemistich of this poem is somewhat incorrectly quoted in Seven Valleys (‘ozr ârid “seek forgiveness” is given rather than pand girid “take counsel,” though it has little change on the overall import of the verse). Sanâ’i was received as a mystic and homiletic poet by the later literary tradition, though he also wrote much profane poetry, as well. The Mevlevi tradition understood Sanâ’i, along with ‘Attâr, to be the poetic and spiritual predecessors of Jalâl al-Din Rumi, and as such, quoting Sanâ’i situates one’s remarks in the Persian gnostic tradition. This is the third line of a very famous poem and Bahá’u’lláh’s quotation of it would probably call to the mind of an educated 19th century reader...
Perhaps the most interesting work of Bahá'u'lláh, at least insofar as genre studies are concerned, is his *Hidden Words* (*Kalemât-e maknûne*), a work of rhymed prose composed/revealed in 1274/1858 while Bahá'u'lláh was in Baghdad. Though conceived as an organic unity, *Kalemât-e maknûne* consists of short independent ethical and mystical counsels, 71 in Arabic and 83 in Persian. This book was originally known by the Bábís among whom it circulated in manuscript form as the *Sahife-ye Fâtemiye* (*The Book of Fatima*), thus identifying it with the Twelver Shi'i tradition of the *moshaf Fâteme* (scroll of Fatima), a series of inspiring thoughts supposedly whispered into the ear of Fatima by an angel to console her upon the death of her father - the Prophet Muhammad. The scroll of Fatima was believed to be handed down by the Imams from generation to generation along with the weapons of the Prophet. Of course, we do not now possess any such text, if it ever did exist, so that we have here a curious case of intertextuality with a non-textual text, or more precisely, the apocryphal tradition of a text. Thus the name - "Hidden Words." *(38)*

Although *The Hidden Words* can be seen in the broader context of wisdom literature (*hekam*, *andarz*) and the homiletic tradition, especially the counsels of 'Alî as related in the *Nahj al-balâgha*, it is specifically, though not explicitly, to the *Hadîth qudsî*, or sacred hadith, that *The Hidden Words* appeal. Generally held by Muslims to be the direct word of God, though not necessarily miraculous in nature as is always maintained for the verses of the *Qur'ân*, the *hadîth qudsî* were a favourite source of allusion for Sufis and Persian poets. They are often prefaced by addresses such as *yâ 'ibâdî* (o My servant), *yâ ibn Âdam* (o son of Adam), etc. In the *Kalemât-e maknûne*, we find these addresses, and others similar to them: *yâ ibn al-insân*, "O son of Man" (an appellation of Christ in the Bible); *yâ ibn al-rûh*, "O son of Spirit;" *yâ ibn al-wujûd*, "O son of existence." In addition to thus echoing the addresses of the *hadîth qudsî*, *The Hidden Words* also reflect their themes and counsels. Take, for example, the following Arabic passage:

\[
\text{Yâ ibn al-insân: kuntu fi qidam dhâtî wa azaliyyat kaynûnatî 'araftu hubbî fîka khalaqtuka wa alqaytu 'alayka mi thâlî wa azhartu laka jamâlî}
\]

\[\text{O Son of Man! Veiled in My immemorial being in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for Thee, therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty. (trans. of Shoghi Effendi)}\]

This passage ought to bring to mind the famous *hadîth qudsî*:

[\text{kuntu kanz an ma khufî fîy an fa ahbabtu an 'urafa fa khalaqtuka fa alqaytu alayka mi thâlî wa azhartu laka jamâlî}\]

\[\text{I was a hidden treasure and desired to be known, hence I created the creation in order to be known}\]

There are numerous other parallels of this sort. For example, another of Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words alludes to the same *hadîth*, though with the love of God for man, rather than the love of God for God foregrounded (on which, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*):

[\text{yâ ibn al-insân, ahbabtu khalaqtuka fa-ahbibni kay adHKuraka wa fi rûh al-hayât u thaabbitaka}\]

\[\text{O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill they soul with the spirit of life.}\]

Compare also the following *hadîth qudsî*.
The Messenger of God said: "God has said, 'O Son of Adam! Spend upon (my creatures) that I may spend upon thee.'"

There are parallels between The Hidden Words and the Qur’án, as well:

and the following Hidden Word:

The Persian Hidden Words are even more intriguing than the Arabic from a literary point of view, in that they tend to be less proverbial and more esoteric, more firmly rooted in the later tradition of rhymed prose (sa’j), and frequently allude to well-known motifs and episodes from Persian poetry. Although perhaps the greater portion of his writings are in Arabic, it is primarily from the Persian literary tradition, as opposed to the religious literature of Arabic, that Bahá’u’lláh’s writings draw their motifs and models (with some exceptions, such as the Lawh-i Sultán). His early Persian prose works should be read in the light of the Sufi literary tradition, particularly as found (or at least as popularly received) in the major classical poets: ‘Attâr, Sa’di, Rumi and Hâfez, scattered lines of whose verse are quoted here and there in Bahá’u’lláh’s epistolary works, especially Haft vâdi (Seven Valleys).

There is surprisingly little stylistic influence from Bábí texts, though a good deal of terminology and doctrine come from those sources. Similarities with the philosophical and theological prose tradition, particularly the illuminationist school, which tended to blend literary and philosophical prose, can also be found. It should be further remembered that Persian poets and prose writers in the 19th century had rejected the ornateness of the Indian style (sabk-e hendi) and had called for a return (bâz gasht) to the models of the 11th-13th centuries. Bahá’u'lláh's prose language in the Persian Hidden Words suggests the influence of Sa’di’s Golestân and Ansân’s Monâjât; undoubtedly additional examples and parallels can be isolated. The themes and motifs, on the other hand, were those that had saturated later Persian literature, and could be evoked by elliptical allusions that would resonate with and perhaps call to the reader's mind an elaborate series of associations, as in the first Persian Hidden Word, which reads almost like a catalogue of classical motifs:

ay sâhebân-e hush
va gush
avval sorush-e dust in ast
ay bolbol-e ma’navi
joz dar golbon-e ma’âni jây ma-gozin
va ay hodhod-e solaymân-e ‘eshq
joz dar sabâ-ye jânân vatan ma-gir
In the following Persian Hidden Word, the gnomic tradition (ândarz) in Persian literature, which stretches back at least into Sasanian and probably into Parthian times, is clearly evident. This example, like most of the Persian Hidden Words, echoes with the aphoristic rhymed prose of Sa’di’s Golestân::

Ay dust dar rowze-ye qalb joz gol-e ‘eshq makâr
va az zayl-e bolbol-e hobb o showq dast madâr
mosâhebat-e abrâr râ ghanimat dân
va az morâfeqat-e ashrâr
dast o del har do bar dâr

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 they hold. Treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly. (trans. by Shoghi Effendi)

The following (and final) example subtly alludes to the legends about the Prophet Muhammad’s ascent into heaven (me’râj):

ay pesar-e hobb
az to tâ rafraf-e emtenâ’-e qorb
va sedre-ye ertefâ’-e ‘eshq
qadam-i fâsele
qadam-e avval bar dâr
va qadam-e digar bar
âlam-e qedâm gozâr
va dar sorâdeq-e khold váred show
pas beshnow
ânche az qalam-e ‘ezz nozul yâft

Here I am using my own translation to emphasize certain points of the me’râj legend:

O Son of Love
 you are but one step away from the rafraf
that will take you to the impenetrable heights of nearness
and the lote tree of the boundary of love
 Take the first step
 and with the second step
 step into the world of pre-existence
 and the pavilion of eternity
 Then listen
 to what has been revealed by the Pen of Might

Here the reader is being told that s/he, too, can aspire in her own spiritual journey to repeat Muhammad’s ascent to heaven (me’râj) on the rafraf, which can mean pillows or cushions, but since the Arabic root R-F-F has the connotation of flapping wings, these cushions are like flying carpets. Most versions of the legend have Muhammad riding on a mythical beast, Burâq, a kind of winged donkey (an iconographic association with the Messiah riding into Jerusalem on an untamed ass) provided by the angel of Revelation, Gabriel. The rafraf will take us beyond the sidrat al-muntahâ, the lote tree beyond which there is no passing. During his me’râj, Muhammad came within two bows’ lengths of this tree and, as stated in a passage of the Qur’ân (53:1-18), gazed upon it with unswerving eyes (mâ zâgha al-basar) only to see that it was shrouded in mystery (îdh yaghshâ al-sidrata mâ yaghshâ, literally: when the lote tree was covered by what covered it). These verses of the Qur’ân have been greatly elaborated in non-canonical materials called the stories of the prophets (qisas al-anbiyâ), similar to the Jewish haggadah, in order to round out the story. In the
Sufi tradition, the light (nûr) of Muhammad’s worship is what covered the tree.

Although Muhammad was unable on his me’râj (ascent to heaven) to advance beyond the sacred precincts of the sidrat al-muntahâ, the lote tree beyond which there is no passing, Bahá’u’lláh tells us that we - the sons of love (‘eshq), a term used technically by Sufis since the 2nd/9th century to mean the mystic love of God, though exoterically it continues to mean romantic human love, as well) - can take two steps beyond this, into the pre-eternal realm, where God’s covenant was made with the soul, and into the eternal pavilion, where, according to Sufi interpretation, man will actually see God, a blessing that was denied to Moses on Sinai. This, of course, is a metaphoric journey that takes place in the believer’s heart, the same journey that Shams al-Din of Tabriz urged Jalâl al-Din Rumi to take in the 13th century:

To follow Mohammad is this: He went on the me’râj, you, likewise, must go in his footsteps. Strive to attain [this] abode in your heart. (39)

Though Bahá’u’lláh invokes the Sufis’ mythopoesis of the beatific vision of God in eternal paradise, God is ineffable, and cannot be seen or heard, as we know from numerous other tablets of Bahá’u’lláh. The human point of contact with the divine is through the revealed text, that which is revealed by the Pen of Might, and it is through what it has revealed that we make our internal ascent unto God. Scripture, then, which as we have seen flows in and through the medium of human language and literature, is man’s vehicle (rafraf) to God. Having been transported by it to the proximity of the divine, however, we must take our own steps to reach the sanctum sanctorum.

As Bahá’u’lláh states elsewhere, man could not bear the direct knowledge of the divine transcendence, so God reveals only a relative truth to man, that which can be understood in the form of human language. This is all that man requires to make that extra two-step leap into the pre-eternal and infinite realm. As the epilogue to the last Persian Hidden Word states:

I bear witness, O Friends! that the favour is complete, the argument fulfilled, the proof manifest and the evidence established. Let it now be seen what your endeavours in the path of detachment will reveal. In this wise hath the divine favour been fully vouchsafed unto you and unto them that are in heaven and on earth.

Bahá’u’lláh was not, of course, the first to employ this me’râj topos and its associated imagery. Though many modern post-secular Iranian readers would have to consciously excavate the rafraf passage to discover its leitmotif, the topos was a favourite of many pre-modern poets and was so ingrained in the Persian poetic consciousness that it would have been immediately obvious to an initiated reader. Sanâ‘i alludes to the same topos in this line from his Sayr al-‘ebâd elâ al-ma’âd (The worshippers’ journey to the promised here-after) with which Bahá’u’lláh’s just-quoted Hidden Word seems to resonate:

su-ye shahr-e qedam qadam bar dâr
khâne-ye ostokhwân be-sag bogzâr

Take a step toward the city of pre-existence
Leave this house of bones to the dogs

Elsewhere, in his Hadíqat al-haqíqat (The Walled Garden of Truth), Sanâ‘i says: az to tâ dust nist rah besyâr(from you to the Friend there is but a little way to go).

Literate versus literal readings of scripture

Despite these and numerous other examples, western Bahá’ís steeped in a devotional approach to Bahá’u’lláh’s texts in translation may insist that knowledge of their literary context, while interesting, does not particularly elucidate their functional import - the pragmatic implications of Bahá’u’lláh’s statements and their significance for Bahá’í law, ethics and daily praxis. It would, however, be a great mistake to assume that only esoteric and symbolic allusions are lurking in the literary sediment. Juan Cole has shown in his article “Problems of Chronology in Bahá’u’lláh’s ‘Tablet of Wisdom’” that echos of previous works may sometimes give us clues about the nature of what is being said; we can sometimes conclude on the basis of traceable allusions to previous works (historical works in the above case) that what is being said is metaphorical and historically or mythically-bound, statements that are truthful in a cultural context without necessarily being factual in a scientific sense.

This can also be true in "legal" texts, as the following example from the Kitáb-i-Aqdas illustrates, where, I think, it is necessary to know the Qur’anic parallels in order to understand the full intent of Bahá’u’lláh’s law. In the Aqdas (verse 107), we find:

it is forbidden you to marry your father’s wives
qad humimat ‘alaykum azwâja abâ’ikum

The Questions and Answers section indicates that the matter of marriage between relatives is left to the House of Justice. This, of course, presents no particular problem, until we ask if it is not strange that Bahá’u’lláh should specifically forbid marriage to one’s stepmother(s), while apparently neglecting to forbid marriage to one’s own mother or sister or daughter?
This dilemma can be easily solved if we assume that Bahá'u'lláh had in mind the Qur'anic laws about marrying one's relatives, found in Sura 4 (Sūrat al-nisā). Recall that the Qur'án appears to allow the espousal of four wives simultaneously. However, specifically excluded from matrimonial possibility are the wives one's father has married, i.e., one's stepmother(s), like the text of the Aqdas. The Qur'án, however, then launches into a much longer list in the next verse that includes mothers, daughters, sisters, father's sisters, mother's sisters, brother's daughters, sister's daughters, wet-nurses, foster-sisters, wives' mothers, stepdaughters, daughters-in-law and two sisters. Indeed, if we compare the passages, we find that the Qur'án verse begins with the same wording employed in the Aqdas (ḥurrimat alāy Kum). This, then, is an instance where quotation from a previous work apparently intends for us to summon up similar semiotically proximate passages which are not explicitly quoted. With one word, "wives," Bahá'u'lláh summons up the entire list of the Qur'án, given in two longish verses. Hence the meaning and content of the previous text, in this case the Qur'án, bleeds somewhat into the meaning and intent of Bahá'u'lláh's text, and we must be cognizant of the provenance of the quote in order to recover the full context of meaning. Indeed, many readers have expressed difficulty in understanding why the Kitáb-i-Aqdas jumps from one subject to the next without any obvious logical connection. The principle of organization animating the style of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas can be seen in the literary model of the Qur'án. Indeed, a secretary writing on behalf of Shoghi Effendi singled out this non-linear structure as distinctively Qur'anic and characteristic of divine revelation in general for a western Bahá'ís apparently confounded by the style:

All Divine Revelation seems to have been thrown out in flashes. The Prophets never composed treatises. That is why in the Qur'án and our own Writings different subjects are so often included in one Tablet. That is why it is "Revelation."(42)

While it is true that the Aqdas was revealed piecemeal, Bahá'u'lláh (unlike Muhammad, who did not himself collect the Qur'án in written form) could have organized it logically, section by section, point by point, much as the treatises and manuals on Islamic law (fiqh) were organized. But the language of God does not flow according to the language of men, as we have seen in the beginning. To follow such a logical plan of organization would have evoked associations of the genre of systematic law books, the class of clerics and knowledge acquired by years of academic study. Bahá'u'lláh, who insists that he has not studied law and theology, appeals instead to the structure of the Qur'án with its juxtapositions, pericopes and disjunctions, as is appropriate to the claim that God has revealed the book.

Scholars have already focussed a great deal of attention on the literary criticism of the Hebrew Bible. The various approaches of source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism have taught us a great deal. More recently Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg have devoted attention to the narrative and poetic art of the Hebrew Bible, while Frank Kermode and others have done the same for the New Testament. Such approaches will undoubtedly prove quite useful in deepening our understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's writings and how meaning is internally produced in his texts. A pre-requisite to this avenue of inquiry is a general understanding of the sources, forms and genres to which his texts appeal. A similar process, as applied to the Hebrew Bible, has been disparagingly described by Edmund Leach as "unscrambling the omelette."(42) We might call this task sifting scripture, not in the culinary sense, but in the sense of an excavation, a kind of literary archaeology, that seeks to recover parts of the past lying just below the surface layers of the text and help us situate the meaning of those scriptural artifacts in their literary context. In this respect, we might also consider the etymology of the word "text," which denotes weaving of different strands into a patterned whole. Scripture, of course, is experienced by the body of believers as having a sacred texture, the fabric of which, though woven of past and present, human and divine, knits together the hearts of the faithful in a new communion.

End Notes

1. The basic ideas presented here were first set forth in a paper for a course at the University of Chicago on Bahá'u'lláh's writings taught by my mentor and friend, Professor Heshmat Moayyad. That paper was presented at a Bahá'í history conference in 1985 and a substantially modified version of it was then delivered at the conference of the American Oriental Society in Chicago in 1987. A further version of the paper was delivered at the Háj Mehdi Arjomand conference on scripture in Wilmette in 1994, and subsequently circulated on the Internet and made available on Jonah Winter's web site for Bahá'í academics. The present form of the argument, though not purged of all its oral features, superseded all previous versions.


3. Variously transliterated as Bahá' Alláh in modern scholarly convention and as Bahá'u'lláh according to the official Bahá'í convention.

4. Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdùl-Bahá (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985). Though there is no reason to doubt the attribution of this prayer to Bahá'u'lláh, the Persian or Arabic original of the text has not, to my knowledge, been identified.


6. See for example, al-Rummání (d. 384/994), al-Nukát fî l'jáz al-Qur'án; al-Khattâbî (d. 386/996), al-Bayân fî l'jáz al-Qur'án; and al-Báqillânî (d. 403/1013), l'jáz al-Qur'án.

7. E.G. Browne, "The Bábís of Persia. II: Their Literature and Doctrines," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 21 (1889): 918n1. See the reprint in Moojan Momen, ed., Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987) 224n1. The translation is my own, as I believe Browne has imperfectly understood the import of the word bar dāshte mishavād: to be lifted, taken from; Browne renders: "these rules are removed from [revealed]...
8. Bayân-e Fârsí, n.p., n.d. (This edition was published by the Azals in Iran).


11. "... placing their whole trust in the matchlessness of Bahá’u'lláh’s teachings, in the all-conquering power of His might and the infallibility of His glorious and oft-repeated promises..." Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 1947-1957 (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1965) 120.

12. "To emperors, kings, princes and potentates, to rulers, governments, clergy and peoples, whether of the East or of the West, whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, or Zoroastrian, He addressed, for well-nigh fifty years, and in the most tragic circumstances, these priceless pearls of knowledge and wisdom that lay hid within the ocean of His matchless utterance." Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1941) 6.

13. "Many are those whose conduct has been ennobled by her inspiring example, who have committed to memory her matchless odes..." Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974 [original edition in 1944]) 76-77.

14. Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By 138-139.

15. A Literary History of Persia, v. 2 (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906) 89. Browne's dating of the text is slightly off; the actual date of composition appears to have been 1278/1861-2 as per the English translation of the Igân (p. 226), though Fâzel-e-Mâzandarâni in Asrâr al-âsâr (124 BE/1967) 1:267-8, argues for the date 1279 AH.


22. Collected in English translation in The Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh to the kings and leaders of the world (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1972).


27. I do not recall seeing the text of this tablet in a printed work, but it circulates hand-to-hand among Iranian Bahá’ís in personal lectionaries, copied down from friends and/or in Bahá’í classes.


31. It has been shown by Sa’d Nafisi, however, that this work is not by the famous ‘Attâr, but probably by an ‘Attâr of Tun living in the 15th century; see Nafisi, Jostoju dar ahvâl o Âsâr-e Qalam-e a’lâ (124 BE/1967) 1:267-8, argues for the date 1279 AH.


33. Note that Fayz-e Kâshâni (1006-1090/1597-1679), two centuries earlier, had written a book by the title Kalemât-e maknûn; but it is more a philosophical work than a collection of spiritual and ethical aphorisms.


42. Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock, eds. Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 3. Leach is actually referring to the modern scholarly endeavour of unscrambling those parts of scripture which are historically true or factual from those that are factually untrue. This approach he condemns for obscuring the religious truth that the texts convey and which was formerly understood.

Text. Regional, Sahel

AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES Sifting Through the Layers of Insecurity in the Sahel: The Case of Mauritania BY CÉDRIC JOURDE

Security threats in the Sahel are characterized by layers of intertwined and crosscutting interests at the local, national, and regional levels. International partners’ misunderstanding of these complex dynamics leaves them susceptible to manipulation. Understanding these layers of influence is vital to addressing the security challenges facing Mauritania and the broader Sahel.

Muslim, sparsely populated, and weak? However, because scripture is revealed through the vehicle of human language, it must therefore accommodate human literary and linguistic conventions. If it failed to do so, it could not be understood. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh points out in many places that divine Revelation assumes a form other than its pure state in order that mortal beings may understand. The human point of contact with the divine is through the revealed text, that which is revealed by the Pen of Might, and it is through what it has revealed that we make our internal ascent unto God. Scripture, then, which as we have seen flows in and through the medium of human language and literature, is man's vehicle (*rafraf*) to God.