

SEVEN MANUSCRIPTS ATTRIBUTED TO BAHÁ' ALLAH

Some further comments -- Denis MacEoin

We must be grateful to Kent Beveridge for having taken the trouble to make available at last the original texts of the letters supposed to have been written by Mirza Husayn ^CAli Bahá' Allah to the Comte de Gobineau. Although the publication of these texts will not, of itself, solve the problem of their provenance, it will, at least, enable discussion on this and other issues to proceed on a more informed and constructive level. In order to render their publication more widely useful, I have provided English translations of the Persian letters, which are here appended to the originals.

In the absence of the extensive materials available to the Bahá'i research department at Haifa, I am not in a position to enter usefully into any very serious discussion concerning the handwriting or seals used in these letters. Nevertheless, it seems worth making a few comments at this point. The statement of the Haifa department to the effect that 'the handwriting is not that of Bahá'u'llah or any of His known amanuenses' is slightly misleading in one respect: it fails to distinguish between the different hands that can be discerned in these documents. As far as I can tell, three different individuals were responsible for the letters: one Turkish (B) and two Persian (A; C, D, E, F, G), but without the originals, I would hesitate to say much more than this. Bahá' Allah certainly employed numerous secretaries at different times, and we have no reason to suppose that he might not have used some individuals for only a few items, leaving no general record of their hands. To compare these letters only with documents written by Bahá' Allah or his 'official' amanuenses is hardly sufficient, and I would recommend a wider scrutiny of manuscript materials in the hands of other members of the Bábí exile community. Letter A certainly seems to be the work of a professional scribe (which would be appropriate to the circumstances), while B appears to be in a Turkish hand (which suggests that it was penned by a translator/composer).

The question of the seals is a little difficult. Haifa records that 'the seal does not correspond with impressions of any of His authentic seals available at the World Centre', but it is not made clear how many of these latter they have. Adib Taherzadeh notes that 'apart from one seal which bore His name, Husayn-^CAli, Bahá'u'llah had altogether ten seals which were made at different times during His ministry' (Revelation of Bahá'u'llah vol.1 p.25) and reproduces ten seals originally reproduced in The Bahá'i World vol.V, p.94. None of these latter seals is that of 'Husayn ^CAli', but that on these letters is (as far as I can see on the best reproduction, that of letter B) precisely that. Is it possible that the Haifa research department is basing its statement on the ten known seals, that it has no copy of the 'Husayn ^CAli' seal, and that the seal on these letters is that seal? An exact reply on this point would be informative.

I am rather less happy about Moojan Momen's argument that 'the style and content of the letters are not compatible with the alleged authorship' (i.e. Bahá' Allah), to which Dr. Beveridge refers. To begin with, content seems scarcely relevant, since these are very specific documents which, by their very nature, are bound to differ in content from other writings of Bahá' Allah (which, of course, themselves differ in terms of subject matter); should the present letters be proved on other grounds to be authentic, then we will simply have to add their contents to the already wide range of matters touched on by Bahá' Allah. Nevertheless, I think Moojan is being somewhat disingenuous in this respect, since, as I shall demonstrate, these letters do, in fact, contain quite a few passages dealing with topics discussed in a number of letters known to be by Bahá' Allah.

As regards style, this is also a little disingenuous. First of all, Bahá' Allah did not have a single literary style on the basis of which a simple comparison can be made; his style varies according to date, subject matter, recipient, and, as I shall note, manner of composition (i.e. whether direct or in another persona). Again the point has to be made that the present letters are unlike other extant writings of Bahá' Allah, in that they are specifically intended as petitions (and so adopt many of the features of standard Persian epistolary style designed for this purpose); should they be proved authentic, we will have another style to add to those already familiar from other works. It is also

worth noting that any attempt to talk about Baha' Allah's style on the basis of the English translation of his writings by Shoghi Effendi would be seriously misleading, and I would caution readers not to attempt to make a stylistic comparison between my renderings here and those to be found elsewhere. Shoghi Effendi uses a uniform style for all his renderings of Baha' Allah's works, regardless of whether the original be in Arabic or Persian, simple or complex, and normally elaborates greatly on their language and even content. An example of how risky it can be to use translations as the basis for such a discussion is to be found in the case of the translations of the Bab's works made by Habib Taherzadeh according to Shoghi Effendi's style: it would appear from these that the Bab's style and that of Baha' Allah were remarkably similar, whereas they differ tremendously.

Here again, however, the matter is not quite as simple as it appears. The present letters do, in fact, bear a close stylistic resemblance to those of Baha' Allah's 'tablets' written in the persona of Mirza Aqa Jan, his principal amanuensis (for examples, see Ma'ida-yi asmani vol.4 pp.121-22, 220-60; *ibid* vol.7 pp.126, 175 ff.; see also Taherzadeh Revelation vol.1 pp.40-42). This may not be insignificant in the present context. The device of speaking through Aqa Jan (if it really is that, as Taherzadeh and others maintain, and not genuinely Aqa Jan writing independently) seems to be used most in letters which give an account of historical events, perhaps as a means of avoiding the embarrassment of having the 'supreme manifestation' referring directly to mundane matters. Insofar as the present letters refer, often in detail, to events in the life of Baha' Allah or to developments affecting his followers in Egypt or elsewhere, it is arguable that a similar device is employed, namely the use (as in the Aqa Jan letters) of the phrases in 'abd or in bande ('this servant') for 'I' etc., and the adoption of a petitionary manner.

The following parallelisms between passages in these letters and in writings of Baha' Allah may help to make some of the foregoing clearer:

- 1) 'Tablet' in Ishraqat p.45: بعد از توبه این مظلوم عب الاجازه حضرت سلطان بعراق عرب
'After this oppressed one went to Arab Iraq by the permission of his highness the Shah.'

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf p.123 (translation p.166): بعد از ورود در عراق بامر پادشاه ایران
'after our arrival in ^cIraq, following the command of His Majesty the Shah of Persia....'

Ibid:

ما را عب الامر باينجا فرستاده اند
'In accordance with the Royal command We have been sent unto this place.'

'Tablet' to Nabil in Ishraqat pp.103-4: این مظلوم از ارض طا بامر حضرت سلطان بعراق عرب توجه نمود
'At the command of the King, this oppressed one turned from the land of ^{Ta} to Arab Iraq.'

Letter A: این عبد از مقر سلطنت ایران باذن واجازه سلطان ... بعراق عرب رفته
'I went from the capital of the kingdom of Iran to Iraq, with the permission and approval of the King....'

- 2) 'Tablet' to Nabil in Ishraqat p.105:
'Seventy individuals were with me.'

هفتاد نفر در حضور بودند

Letter E:

'with seventy individuals.'

با هفتاد نفر

- 3) 'Tablet' in Ma'ida-yi asmani vol.7 p.193:
'they suddenly surrounded the house'

بعثة بيت من احاطه نمودند

Letter E:

'the officials... suddenly surrounded the house.'

بعثة مأمورین ... دور خانه من رفته

- 4) Surat al-haykal p.97 (referring to Baghdad): ابدأ خلاف دولت وملت و مغایر اصول و آداب اهل مملکت از این عباد ظاهر نشد
'There has never been manifested by these servants (anything) contrary to the state or the nation, or opposed to the laws and principles of the people of (this) country.'

Letter E: ابدأ از این عباد و متعلقان خلاف اصول ظاهر نشد
'... nothing contrary to the laws (of the state) was ever manifested by me or my followers.'

Ibid: ابدأ از این عباد تقصیر و خلاف اصول ظاهر نشد
'Neither wrongdoing nor acts contrary to the laws have ever been manifested by us.'

- 5) Surat al-haykal p.102: این عباد را باستانبول احضار نمودند
'They summoned me to Istanbul.'

Letter A: این عباد را باستانبول خوانستند
'They called me to Istanbul.'

- 6) Surat al-haykal p.124 (on Acre, in Arabic): انهار اخبرب مدن الدنيا واقبحها صورة وارداها هواء وانتهها ماء
'It is the most desolate of the cities of the world, the ugliest in appearance, the worst with respect to its air, and the most stinking with respect to its water.'

Letter E: عکاکه بد آب و هوا ترین روی زمین است
'Acre, which has the worst water and air in the world.'

- 7) 'Tablet' in Ma'ida-yi Asmani vol.8 p.5: وبعد وارد گلی بولی شوم عمرفندکین باشی (sic) مخصوص با پنجنفر ادن باشی وارد شدند
'We then arrived in Gallipoli; ^cUmar Effendi, a specially-(-appointed) major, arrived with five corporals.'

Letter E: بعد از ورود (گلیبولی) مأمور مخصوص عمرفندکین باشی با پنج چاروش از استانبول وارد شدند
'After our arrival (in Gallipoli), a special officer, ^cUmar Effendi Binbashi (major), arrived from Istanbul with five sergeants.'

- 8) 'Tablet' in Ma'ida-yi asmani vol.8 p.5: Use of له (Austria).

Letter G: Same.

- 9) 'Tablet' in Ma'ida-yi asmani vol.8 p.27: چهار ماه در آن مدینه (استانبول) ماندیم
'We stayed four months in that city (i.e. Istanbul).'

Letter A: چهار ماه در استانبول توقف شد
'We remained four months in Istanbul.'

- 10) ESW p.78 (trans. p.106): مقصود از این حرکت ذلت این مظلوم بوده
'Their design in this matter to dishonour this Wronged One.'

Letter G: و از این فقره هم گویا مقصود افتضاح این بنده بوده
'It seems that the purpose of this was to bring dishonour on me.'

- 11) ESW p.79 (trans. p.108): از قاضی دولت علیه ایران که در اینجهاست بوده اند استفسار فرمائید
'... inquire from the Consuls of the honoured Persian Government who have been in this country.'

Letter A:

'Let enquiries be made of the consuls resident here.'

از قاضیها که در این ارض ساکنه استفسار شود

- 12) ESW pp.90-92 (trans. pp.123-5): Various accusations against the Iranian Embassy in Istanbul.

Letter A: Similar accusations.

- 13) Sūrat al-mulūk (in Alwāh-i nāzila khitāb bi-mulūk p.41; Gleanings pp.235-6):
یبنغی سلطان بان یگون فیضه کالشمش یریبی کلشی ... و یگون رحمة کالسحاب
ینفق علی الجاد کما ینفق السحاب امطار الرحمة علی کل ارض
'It behoveth every king to be as bountiful as the sun, which fostereth the growth of all beings.... The King should be as generous, as liberal in his mercy as the clouds, the outpourings of whose bounty are showered upon every land....'

Letter G:

شان فورسیه اشراق و اعطای انوار است و لایق سحاب امطار
در اینمقام بر حضرت شاهنشاه رعایت جمعی مظلوم لازمست
'It befits the sun to rise up and shed its light, and it behoves the cloud to pour down rain. It is, therefore, necessary for his highness the King to look after the interests of an oppressed people.'

It may also be noted that the statements in letter A that 'I went from the capital of the kingdom of Iran to Iraq, with the permission and approval of the King and the awareness of the foreign ambassadors....' and 'even now I have in my possession the document (issued by) the government of Iran, (stating that) we left with (their) permission and approval' are borne out by a passage in a letter from ^cAbd al-Baha' to Jibran Effendi Sahibi (in Ma'ida-yi asmani vol.9 pp.81-82). According to this letter, the idea that Baha' Allah was forced to leave Iran is a falsehood; in reality, he himself asked the Iranian government for permission to depart on his hijra to Iraq. 'Until now,' ^cAbd al-Baha' continues, 'the official papers from the Iranian Prime Minister's office and the (Ottoman) embassy in Tehran are in our possession!'. This letter also refers to the concern of the foreign ambassadors in Tehran.

The foregoing represents only a preliminary and partial attempt to demonstrate verbal and contextual parallelisms between some of the present letters and certain authenticated works of Baha' Allah. On the basis of these and other considerations, I think that a reasonable case can be made for ascribing their authorship to Baha' Allah himself, rather than to any of the other groups or individuals suggested by Dr. Beveridge. I cannot, in fact, see any a priori reason for supposing that Baha' could not have been their author, other than the hagiographical assumption that he never sought assistance from foreign powers. The standard image of Baha' Allah as a long-suffering exile and prisoner is, I think, one that needs considerable revision. Even so, I cannot see that a refusal to accept external assistance or even to appeal for it is demanded by the popular version of Baha' Allah's life.

Baha' Allah showed gratitude for the intervention of the Russian minister in Tehran in effecting his release from prison there in 1853; in his Surat al-muluk, he calls on the rulers of the world to 'examine Our Cause, enquire into the things that have befallen Us, and decide justly between Us and Our enemies' and condemns them because, 'though aware of most of Our afflictions, ye, nevertheless, have failed to stay the hand of the aggressor'; he reproached the Emperor Franz Joseph

(somewhat unreasonably, I would have thought) for having failed to enquire about him when visiting Jerusalem; in his letter to Nasir al-Din Shah, he expresses the hope 'that His Majesty the Shah will himself examine these matters, and bring hope to the hearts'; while in Edirne, he contacted Rev. L. Rosenberg, whom he asked to appeal to the British Vice Consul for the exercise of influence on his behalf, in order to prevent a further exile (see Momen Babi and Baha'i Religions pp.187-90).

I am something of a loss as to why Balyuzi, Momen, and now Beveridge have all obviously felt uneasy about the possibility that Baha' Allah might obviously have written these letters. Not only is his authorship of them consistent with his behaviour noted in the last paragraph, but it has plenty of other perfectly respectable parallels. The prophet Muhammad sought help from the bedouin at the annual fairs in Mecca, may have looked for assistance to the Negus of Abyssinia, tried to find a protector in al-Ta'if following the death of his uncle Abu Talib, was compelled to plead for formal protection (jiwar) in order to return to Mecca, and finally accepted the military help of the Medinans offered him in the Treaty of War. None of this is thought to be inconsistent with his role as prophet. Again, the strategy of making contact with influential persons, particularly governors and rulers, and from time to time seeking their immediate protection in cases of persecution, was much used by ^CAbd al-Baha' and Shoghi Effendi and remains a normal procedure in contemporary Baha'i activity. Once this point has been grasped, I cannot see what serious objection there can be to the possibility of Baha' Allah's having written letters such as these printed here.

There certainly appear to be no grounds whatever for Dr. Beveridge's quite cavalier suggestion that the letters may have been the work of some of the adherents of Mirza Yahya Subh-i Azal. This sort of gratuitous attribution of perfidious schemes to 'covenant-breakers' and 'enemies of the faith' and all the other components of the Baha'i demonology has a long and rather shabby history. The most notable example is the extraordinary attempt by Mirza Abu 'l-Fadl Gulpaygani and ^CAbd al-Baha' to attribute the Nuqtat al-Kaf to Azali authorship and to allege that E.G. Browne had colluded with Azalis in the production and publication of the work -- claims that are wholly untenable for several reasons that have been discussed by me elsewhere (see my Revised Survey of the Sources for Early Babi History and Doctrine). This ploy of falling back on the Azalis as sources for materials found embarrassing for one reason or another is really most disturbing. In the present instance, it seems a very wild suggestion indeed. Why should Azalis not go directly to foreign consuls, without any need to seek assistance for the Baha'i faction, to whom they were opposed and from whom they sought to be separated? Why should they write specifically about Baha' Allah and his followers, thereby running the risk that only they would be offered help? Why should they not at least mention themselves, even if only in passing? Is it not something of a coincidence that, although only four Azalis were sent to Acre, the very individual or individuals responsible for writing these letters should have been among them? The whole hypothesis is so implausible that I am surprised anyone even seriously entertained it at all.

It is, therefore, my conclusion that we may accept provisionally the original attribution of authorship to Baha' Allah as valid, unless and until fresh evidence to the contrary is discovered. It may be impossible to confirm this attribution absolutely, but it is even more difficult to establish a plausible alternative authorship. In any case, the onus of proof rests with those who wish to prove that Baha' Allah did not write the letters, rather than with those who are happy to accept that he did. I see no reason, therefore, why we may not now make use of these documents as reasonably reliable sources for future historical research.

NOTE

The quality of the copies sent by Dr. Beveridge was not first-rate, and this has meant that a number of words and phrases remain illegible: I have noted all such instances in my translations. In order to make further reproduction from these copies worthwhile, I have undertaken to touch up the texts, except where blurring or lacunae were too great. It is to be hoped that sharper copies will eventually be made available; in the meantime, the present copies provide us with good working texts.