

The Hidden Words of Bahā'ullāh

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Uttered by Bahā'ullāh in 1858 while striding on the banks of the Tigris near Baghdad and taken down by his amanuenses, *The Hidden Words* (*Kalemāt-e Maknūne*) is unique among the voluminous Bahā'ī scriptures. It is a collection of brief ethical injunctions and mystical visions: 71 in Arabic and 83 in Persian. In the minds of the early *Bābīs*, among whom *The Hidden Words* circulated in manuscript form, the title connected the *Words* with the Shī'ī tradition of *Moṣṣaf-e Fāṭeme*, a collection of spiritual cantos that were supposedly whispered in the ears of Fatima by an angel to console her upon the death of her father, the prophet Muhammad. No text of these cantos exists today, and it is possible that it never existed. Thus the tenuous connection with Twelver Shī'ī traditions in the minds of the early *Bābīs* is a case of apocryphal tradition of a text.

It has become customary to categorize the writings of Bahā'ullāh during the period of his sojourn in Baghdad (1853-63) as “mystical”. A tacit assumption behind this oversimplified categorization is that Bahā'ullāh underwent a mental evolution, going through a mystical phase before becoming a visionary builder of a new world order. Upon closer scrutiny both the categorization and the assumption it is based upon prove to be too facile. A major work of this period, a historical-hermeneutical treatise, *The Book of Certitude* (*Ketāb-e īqān*, 1862), is anything but mystical in its clarity of exposition and directness of style. And *The Hidden Words*, for all its brevity and the inclusion of certain allusive, mystical passages, may be seen to contain the germs of Bahā'ullāh's integrated spiritual-ethical, as well as social-political, model for a future society.

In the Arabic introduction to the *Kalemāt-e Maknūne* Bahā'ullāh provides the key to the manifold hidden facets of this work:

“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 essence thereof and clothed it in the garment

of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfill in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of divine virtue.”¹

It is immediately clear that Bahā’ullāh intends to provide a link between the received wisdom of the past and the moral-ethical imperatives guiding modern man. What is timeless in the past is revived in the present and built upon for the future.

Although this paper focuses primarily on the formal aspects of the Persian verses of *The Hidden Words*, some introductory words on the contents of the whole work are in order. Close analysis of the text shows that it contains, in highly compressed form, the seeds of Bahā’ullāh’s principles for regeneration of the individual and society as revealed in his later texts. The mystical vision of the human soul attaining its ultimate goal of transcendence is related to the precepts of social equality, political democracy and economic justice.

Any discussion of the literal form of a sacred religious traditional text evokes a set of familiar problems. Since the *Bahā’ī* Faith developed from the cultural matrix of Islam, one should note the precedence of this issue in that context. Early debates about the originality of the style of the Koran led to the concept of *e ʔāz* or the miraculous inimitability. Taken to its logical conclusion, this concept leads to the perceptually ludicrous and doctrinally untenable conclusion that God is exclusively Arabophone, but this does not appear to have bothered most devout Muslims. In marked contrast to this view, and perhaps to forestall any such tendencies among his followers, Bahā’ullāh makes no claim of *e ʔāz* for his writings. In fact, in *The Hidden Words* (Arabic 67) he says clearly:

“...All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and melody of My voice.”²

This may be taken as a definition of revelation in *Bahā’ī* doctrine as a form of language comparable to the language of mankind and not to

1. Bahā’ullāh, *The Hidden Words*, translated by Shoghi Effendi, Baha’i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1948, p. 3.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

that of God. It is therefore natural that it should be influenced by human speech.

Seen in this light the formal roots of some parts of *The Hidden Words*, especially those in Arabic, may be found in Islamic homiletic traditions such as the *Naḥḥ al-Balāḡe* (attributed to 'Alī) and even more so in the *Ḥadīs-e Qodsī*. It is more difficult generically to isolate the Persian parts of *The Hidden Words* and to identify the provenance of their formal features. While they belong entirely within the cultural domain of Persian literature, the overall texture of the work far surpasses any traditional genre in its complexity, variety and originality. In some verses of the Persian *Hidden Words* we can discern an affinity with the genre of *andarz-nāme* (Book of Advice), which has strong precedence in Sasanian times and may go back as far as the Parthian era; and both the *saḡ'* (rhymed prose) style as well as the aphoristic tone of certain passages recall the *Golestān* of Sa'dī.

The very opening of the Persian part of *The Hidden Words*, as Professor Frank Lewis has observed,³ reads almost like a catalogue of classical motifs:

“O YE PEOPLE THAT HAVE MINDS TO KNOW AND EARS TO HEAR!

The first call of the Beloved is this: O mystic nightingale! Abide not but in the rose-garden of the spirit. O messenger of the Solomon of love! Seek thou no shelter except in the Sheba of the well-beloved, and O immortal phoenix! dwell not save on the mount of faithfulness. Therein is thy habitation, if on the wings of thy soul thou soarest to the realm of the infinite and seekest to attain thy goal.”⁴

ای صاحبان هوش و گوش، اول سروش دوست اینست

ای بلبل معنوی جز در گلبن معانی جای مگزین و ای هدهد سلیمان عشق جز در
سبای جانان وطن مگیر و ای عنقای بقا جز در قاف وفا محل میپذیر اینست مکان تو
اگر بلامکان بیر جان بر پری و آهنگ مقام خود رایگان نمائی.

3. Frank Lewis, “Scripture as Literature: sifting through layers of the text,” in *Baha'i Studies Review*, Volume 7, 1997, p. 12.

4. Bahā'ullāh, Op. cit., p. 22.

Bahā'ullāh's true poetic gift is evident in this passage, not just his musical handling of the familiar tropes of Persian classical literature, but also the way in which he imbeds in the subtext of *The Hidden Words* motifs that have profound cultural associational resonance for any literate Persophone. The *hodhod* (hoopoe) of the Solomon of love immediately activates a chain of associations with the *Conference of the Birds* of 'Aṭṭār and the corpus of *Qeṣā al-Anbīyā'*; as does the mention of 'anqā' upon the mountain of *Qāf*, which resonates with the *Sīmorḡ* of both 'Aṭṭār and Ferdowsī. In the 7th Persian verse of *The Hidden Words*, which begins with "O Son of Love" (*Ey Pesar-e Hobb*),⁵ there is an even more resonant allusion to the *me'raj*, the night-journey of Muhammad. *Hobb* is the root of *Habīb*, the sobriquet bestowed on the prophet Muhammad, and the mention of *rafrāf*, cushions [of clouds] evokes the highest level to which Muhammad ascended. It ends with the startling assertion that by paying heed to what has been revealed by the pen of Bahā'ullāh one may even go two steps beyond the terminus of the *me'raj*.

“O SON OF LOVE

Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity. Give ear then to that which hath been revealed by the pen of glory.”⁶

ای پسر حب

از تو تا رفرف امتناع قرب و سدرهٔ ارتفاع عشق قدمی فاصله قدم اول بردار و قدم دیگر بر عالم قدم گذار و در سرادق خلد وارد شو پس بشنو آنچه از قلم عز نزول یافت.

What is remarkable is the variety, complexity and novelty of the fabric of the Persian verses, woven of familiar threads. To begin with, despite a surface similarity of style, they cannot be fitted into any one generic mold. They range from clear and unambiguous pieces of advice (*andarz*) for living a virtuous, chaste and pious life, to mystical visions of the human soul transcending the limitations of this life, to symbolic and allegorical narratives that may have historical allusions, to rhapsodic passages that are song-like in tone, to stern admonitions to the heedless

5. Bahā'ullāh, *The Hidden Words*, p. 24.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

rich, the unjust ruler and the thoughtless neighbor. Some are spoken with the voice of God, some clearly with Bahā'ullāh's own voice and some with an impersonal voice.

The combination of mystical exhortation and practical ethical advice, which we find in the 3rd Persian verse of *The Hidden Words*, is also characteristic of several others and defies the simplistic characterization of the text as "mystical". It evokes an otherworldly vision with a sober, worldly moderation, walking the mystic path with feet, so to speak, still firmly planted on the ground.

"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 thy hold. Treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly."⁷

ای پسر حب

از تو تا رُفرف امتناع قرب و سدره^۸ ارتفاع عشق قدمی فاصله قدم اول بردار و قدم دیگر بر عالم قدم گذار و در سِرادق خلد وارد شو پس بشنو آنچه از قلم عز نزول یافت.

In number 5 there is a succinct rule for the cultivation of healthy human relations.

"O SON OF DUST

Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother. Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning."⁸

ای پسر خاک

براستی میگویم غافلترین عباد کسی است که در قول مجادله نماید و بر برادر خود تفوق جوید بگو ای برادران باعمال خود را بیارائید نه باقوال.

Number 18 is one of several of the Persian verses in *The Hidden Words* in which Bahā'ullāh makes a not very oblique allusion to his own station as the Supreme Manifestation expected by the *Bābī* community.

7. Ibid., p. 23.

8. Ibid., pp. 23-4.

“O YE DWELLERS IN THE HIGHEST PARADISE!

Proclaim unto the children of assurance that within the realm of holiness, nigh unto the celestial paradise, a new garden hath appeared, round which circle the denizens of the realm on high and the immortal dwellers of the exalted paradise. Strive, then, that ye may attain that station, that ye may unravel the mysteries of love from its wind-flowers and learn the secret of divine and consummate wisdom from its eternal fruits. Solaced are the eyes of them that enter and abide therein!”⁹

ای اهل فردوس برین

اهل یقین را اخبار نمائید که در فضای قدس قرب رضوان روضهٔ جدیدی ظاهر گشته و جمیع اهل عالین و هیاکل خلد برین طائف حول آن گشته اند پس جهدی نمائید تا بآن مقام درآئید و حقائق اسرار عشق را از شقایقش جوئید و جمیع حکمت‌های بالغه احدیه را از اثمار باقیه اش بیابید قرّت ابصار الذین هم دخلوا فیه آمنین.

Number 19 is an evocation of a mystic gathering and a primordial covenant.

“O MY FRIENDS

Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you.”¹⁰

9. Ibid., p. 27.

10. Ibid., pp. 27-8.

ای دوستان من

آیا فراموش کرده اید آن صبح صادق روشنی را که در ظل شجرهٔ انیسا که در فردوس اعظم غرس شده جمیع در آن فضای قدس مبارک نزد من حاضر بودید و به سه کلمهٔ طیبیه تکلم فرمودم و جمیع آن کلمات را شنیده و مدهوش گشتید و آن کلمات این بود ای دوستان رضای خود را بر رضای من اختیار مکنید و آنچه برای شما نخواهم هرگز نخواهید و با دل‌های مرده که به آمال و آرزو آلوده شده نزد من می‌آید اگر صدر را مقدس کنید حال آن صحرا و آن فضا را بنظر درآرید و بیان من بر همه شما معلوم شود.

Number 24 is addressed to the *'olamā* of Bahā'ullāh's time, but rings true of power-seeking ecclesiastics of all denominations at all times.

“O YE THAT ARE FOOLISH, YET HAVE A NAME TO BE WISE
Wherefore do ye wear the guise of shepherds, when inwardly ye have become wolves, intent upon My flock? Ye are even as the star, which riseth ere the dawn, and which, though it seemth radiant and luminous, leadeth the wayfarers of My city astray into the paths of perdition.”¹¹

ای جهلای معروف به علم

چرا در ظاهر دعوی شبانی کنید و در باطن ذئب اغنام من شده اید مثل شما مثل ستارهٔ قبل از صبح است که در ظاهر درّی و روشن است و در باطن سبب اضلال و هلاکت کاروانهای مدینه و دیار من است.

Numbers 48 and 74 are clear assertions of social equality and its corollary, political democracy. Numbers 49, 53 and 54 set forth the principle of economic justice by reminding the rich of their moral responsibility and entrusting to them the care of the poor.

“O YE RICH ONES ON EARTH!

The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.”¹²

ای اغنیای ارض

فقراء امانت منند در میان شما پس امانت مرا درست حفظ نمائید و به راحت نفس خود تمام نیردازید.

11. Ibid., p. 30.

12. Ibid., p. 41.

Numbers 62 and 63 are powerful condemnations of oppression and tyranny.

“O OPPRESSORS ON EARTH!

Withdraw your hands from tyranny, for I have pledged Myself not to forgive any man’s injustice. This is My covenant which I have irrevocably decreed in the preserved tablet and sealed it with My seal of glory.”¹³

ای ظالمان ارض

از ظلم دست خود را کوتاه نمائید که قسم یاد نموده ام از ظلم احدی نگذرم و این عهدیست که در لوح محفوظ محتوم داشتم و به خاتم عزّ محتوم.

Number 76 is a narration of a symbolic event, which may have a historic imprint but carries also a timeless echo of some of Sohrawardī’s visionary recitals.

“O SON OF JUSTICE!

In the night-season the beauty of the immortal Being hath repaired from the emerald heights of fidelity unto the *Şadratul-Montahā*, and wept with such a weeping that the concourse on high and the dwellers of the realm above wailed at His lamenting. Whereupon there was asked, Why the wailing and weeping? He made reply: As bidden I waited expectant upon the hill of faithfulness, yet inhaled not from them that dwell on earth the fragrance of fidelity. Then summoned to return I beheld, and lo! certain doves of holiness were sore tried within the claws of the dogs of earth. Thereupon the Maid of heaven hastened forth unveiled and resplendent from Her mystic mansion, and asked of their names, and all were told but one. And when urged, the first letter thereof was uttered, whereupon the dwellers of the celestial chambers rushed forth out of their habitation of glory. And whilst the second letter was pronounced they fell down, one and all, upon the dust. At that moment a voice was heard from the innermost shrine: ‘Thus far and no further.’ Verily we bear witness to that which they have done and now are doing.”¹⁴

13. Ibid., p 44.

14. Ibid., pp. 49-50.

ای پسر انصاف

در لیل جمال هیکل بقا از عقبهٔ زمردی وفا به سدرهٔ منتهی رجوع نمود و گریست گریستنی که جمیع ملاً عالین و کروبین از نالهٔ او گریستند و بعد از سبب نوحه و ندبه استفسار شد مذکور داشت که حسب الامر در عقبه وفا منتظر ماندم و راحهٔ وفا از اهل ارض نیافتم و بعد آهنگ رجوع نمودم. ملحوظ افتاد که حمامات قدسی چند در دست کلاب ارض مبتلا شده اند در این وقت حوریهٔ الهی از قصر روحانی بی ستر و حجاب دوید و سؤال از اسامی ایشان نمود و جمیع مذکور شد الا اسمی از اسماء و چون اصرار رفت حرف اول اسم از لسان جاری شد اهل غرفات از مکامن عزّ خود بیرون دویدند و چون بحرف دوم رسید جمیع بر تراب ریختند در آن وقت ندا از مکمن قرب رسید زیاده براین جایزه انا کتّا شهداء علی ما فعلوا و حینذکانوا یفعلون.

In numbers 79, 80 and 81 we hear the “footsteps on solid ground”. These verses are exhortations to useful labor, fruitful endeavor and avoidance of idleness and sloth.

“O MY SERVANT!

The basest of men are they that yield no fruit on earth. Such men are verily counted as among the dead, nay better are the dead in the sight of God than those idle and worthless souls.”

“O MY SERVANT!

The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.”¹⁵

ای بندهٔ من

پست ترین ناس نفوس هستند که بی ثمر در ارض ظاهرند و فی الحقیقه از اموات محسوبند بلکه اموات از آن نفوس معطلهٔ مهمله ارجح عندالله مذکور.

ای بندهٔ من

بهترین ناس آنانند که باقتراف تحصیل کنند و صرف خود و ذوی القربی نمایند حباً لله ربّ العالمین.

15. Ibid., pp. 51.

No words can convey the rhetorical richness of Bahā'ullāh's *The Hidden Words* and the force of ethical imperatives better than his own conclusion:

“The mystic and wondrous Bride, hidden ere this beneath the veiling of utterance, hath now, by the grace of God and His divine favor, been made manifest even as the resplendent light shed by the beauty of the Beloved. I bear witness, O friends! that the favor is complete, the argument fulfilled, the proof manifest and the evidence established. Let it now be seen what your endeavors in the path of detachment will reveal. In this wise hath the divine favor been fully vouchsafed unto you and unto them that are in heaven and on earth. All praise to God, the Lord of all Worlds.”¹⁶

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.