

Translation and provisional translations

by Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

Compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice.

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1. Selected Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi and by or on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice on Translation

From a Letter Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

1. He is interested in accomplishing two things - he would like in the European languages to have as much uniformity with the English translations as possible; he does not wish the Bahá'í translations to be in any way a flagrant violation of the rules of the language into which our literature is being translated.

Your Committee must conscientiously study this question, and then do the best you can to have the Bahá'í literature in French meet the high standards of the French language and grammar.

(15 February 1957 to the National Translation and Publication Committee of France)

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

2. The matter of translation is a major problem. As you yourself know only too well, to convey exactly the meaning and flavour of a passage from one language to another is often impossible and one can but labour to approach as near as possible to the unattainable perfection. Even our Beloved Guardian, whose skill in this art amounted to genius, characterized his translation of the "Kitáb-i-Iqán" as "one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation" and he expressed the hope "that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal - a befitting rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's matchless utterance."

The difficulty of translation increases when two languages express the thoughts and metaphors of widely differing cultures; thus, it is infinitely more difficult for a European to conceive the thought patterns expressed in Arabic or Persian than to understand a passage written in English. Moreover, the Beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired Interpreter of the Holy Writings; thus, where a passage in Persian or Arabic could give rise to two different expressions in English he would know which one to convey. Similarly he would be much better equipped than an average

translator to know which metaphor to employ in English to express a Persian metaphor which might be meaningless in literal translation.

Thus, in general, speakers of other European tongues will obtain a more accurate translation by following the Guardian's English translation than by attempting at this stage in Bahá'í history to translate directly from the original.

This does not mean, however, that the translators should not also check their translations with the original texts if they are familiar with Persian or Arabic. There may be many instances where the exact meaning of the English text is unclear to them and this can be made evident by comparison with the original.

(From a letter dated 8 December 1964 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

3. A translation should of course be as true as possible to the original while being in the best possible style of the language into which it is being translated. However, you should realize that it will not be possible to translate the Tablets adequately into easy, modern Dutch. Many of the original Writings of Bahá'í and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are written in very exalted and poetic Persian and Arabic and therefore a similar flavour should be attempted in the language into which it is translated. You will see, for example, that in translating the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh into English the beloved Guardian has created a very beautiful and poetic style in English using many words which might be considered archaic and are reminiscent of the English used by the translators of the King James Version of the Bible.

As you point out, a literal translation is often a bad one because it can produce a phraseology of imagery that would convey the wrong impression; thus, a translator is at times compelled to convey the meaning of the original by means of a form of words suited to the language. However, a person translating the Bahá'í Writings must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting.

(From a letter dated 29 October 1973 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

4. Those who are entrusted with the task of translating the Sacred Writings from the original into English should study the original very closely, and then attempt to express as accurately and as beautifully as possible in English that which the original conveys. To do this they frequently have to use various different synonyms in English to give the best translation of the same Arabic or Persian word when it appears in different contexts. Conversely, they may have to use the same English word in different contexts to translate various different words in the original. In doing this they attempt to follow the example set by Shoghi Effendi in his magnificent translations.

(From a letter dated 31 May 1981 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Translation and Revision Committee of a National Spiritual Assembly.)

5. With regard to your question about the style of English used in the translation of Bahá'í prayers, we are asked to point out that finding an adequate style in English for expressing beautifully the poetic, metaphorical and allusive style of many of the Bahá'í Scriptures is not easy. The Persian and Arabic of the Bahá'í Writings are themselves considerably different from the current styles and usages in those languages. Shoghi Effendi's solution of using a slightly archaic form of English, which is somewhat equivalent to the use in the original languages, makes possible the use of images and metaphors that might seem strange if expressed in modern English.

Furthermore, styles of writing are changing comparatively rapidly. If it were already found necessary to use a style different from that used for translations fifty years ago, one can estimate that a further change would be called for fifty years hence. One merely has to consider the large number of new translations of the Bible that have appeared, and are still appearing, and yet many English-speaking Christians prefer to continue using the Authorized Version in spite of its proven inaccuracies. Holy Scriptures have a profound meaning for their readers, and to change the familiar words too often can be gravely disturbing.

Books of Scripture themselves mould the language in which they are written. The House of Justice believes that if translators strive to render the words of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá into English in a way that reproduces as accurately as possible the meaning of the originals, that is as

beautiful as possible, and that harmonizes closely with the style used by Shoghi Effendi, these Writings themselves will have a far-reaching effect on the ability of Bahá'ís, and especially Bahá'í children and youth, to use the English language effectively for thought and for expression.

(From a letter dated 3 February 1988 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

6. Of course the most fundamental requirement for the attainment of a good translation is the availability of the translator who has not only a thorough understanding of the original language, but also is able to write in clear and beautiful French, so that he can re-express in French not only the true meaning of the original, but can clothe it in language which appropriately reproduces in the French idiom the beauty of style of the original. While a literal translation is almost inevitably a bad translation, the translator must guard against departing from or adding to the meaning of the original even though he may have to use a phrase to translate a word, or reduce a phrase in the original to one word in the French, or recast the order of a sentence, or replace a metaphor which would be meaningless if translated literally by an equivalent one which conveys the same meaning. In translating Shoghi Effendi's writings in particular, you may find that many of his long sentences, which are perfectly clear in English, are impossible in French and must be divided into shorter ones. If there is no French-speaking Bahá'í with the requisite command of both languages, or if such friends are over-burdened, you may most certainly employ non-Bahá'í translators. Here, however, you may face another problem, that of the translator's understanding the Bahá'í teachings which underlie the words. It would be essential for you to have such translations carefully checked by knowledgeable Bahá'ís, who can raise with the translator any passages which they feel convey the wrong meaning.

When you are having any of the Sacred Texts translated on the basis of authorized English translations, you should involve in the work one or more Bahá'ís who are fluent in French and are also familiar with the original Arabic or Persian. Thus, when the translator finds he is unable to grasp the exact meaning of the English words, his understanding can be illuminated by reference to the original texts.

(From a letter dated 2 December 1988 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Maison d'Editions Bahá'íes)

2. Policies Governing Authorized and Provisional Translations of the Bahá'í Holy Writings into English and their Publication

4 July 1999

The principal purpose of these policies is to extend the use of provisional translations to publications in books and pamphlets, provided that they are of adequate quality, without involving the delays which would be required to have them thoroughly reviewed, corrected and polished.

1. Tablets, or extracts therefrom, translated into English for use or publication by the Bahá'í World Centre will continue to be reviewed by an ad hoc translation and review committee at the World Centre and designated as authorized translations.
2. Individual believers are free to translate into English any of the Holy Writings for their own use. Such translations may also be issued electronically, and may be published in circulars or journals without review by anyone other than the editors of the publications, but they must, in all cases, be clearly labeled as "provisional translations."
3. If such translations are to be included in books or pamphlets intended for publication by a Bahá'í publisher, the Trust or private publisher involved should forward the manuscript to the Bahá'í World Centre for clearance, together with copies of the Arabic or Persian texts used in the

translation. If the publisher is not a Bahá'í agency, the authors or translators themselves should forward the manuscript and the Arabic or Persian texts to the World Centre for consideration prior to the involvement of any non-Bahá'í publisher. If the translations are found to be of a quality adequate for publication, the manuscript will be returned to the sender with a note to this effect. Such translations should be identified as "provisional translations". If the translations are found not to be of acceptable quality, they will be returned to the translator for reworking. This procedure does not replace the normal review process for the book as a whole, which remains the responsibility of the National Spiritual Assembly within whose area of jurisdiction the book or pamphlet is to be published.

Letter from the House, 16 September 1992

The Universal House of Justice
Bahá'í World Centre
Department of the Secretariat

16 September 1992

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The questions contained in your letter to ... about the language of Revelation and the status of Shoghi Effendi's translations were referred to the Universal House of Justice. We are instructed to convey the following response.

With respect to your inquiry about whether, in the Bahá'í context, English might possibly be regarded as a language of Revelation, the House of Justice asks us to explain that, while Shoghi Effendi's translations of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh into English carry with them a large measure of interpretation of the intent and purpose of the Author of the text—an interpretation which he, as Interpreter of the Sacred Text, could alone authoritatively provide—one should not conclude that the English language into which the Writings were translated could, therefore, be considered as a language of Revelation.

As to the special status of Shoghi Effendi's translations, the beloved Guardian in a letter dated 15 November 1956 written on his behalf specified that "this English translation" of a Text should form the "basis" for translations into other European languages. The Universal House of Justice, in a letter of 8 September 1964 underlined the uniqueness of the translations of Shoghi Effendi and provided the following elucidation:

...the beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired Interpreter of the Holy Writings; thus, where a passage in Persian or Arabic could give rise to two different expressions in English he would know which one to convey. Similarly he would be much better equipped than an average translator to know which metaphor to employ in English to express a Persian metaphor which might be meaningless in literal translation.

Thus, in general, speakers of other European tongues will obtain a more accurate translation by following the Guardian's English translation than by attempting at this stage in Bahá'í history to translate directly from the original.

This does not mean, however, that the translators should not also check their translation with the original texts if they are familiar with Persian or Arabic. There may be many instances where the exact meaning of the English text is unclear to them and this can be made evident by comparison with the original....

The Universal House of Justice has also clarified that while the English translations of the Guardian

might serve as a useful resource, translations into Oriental languages such as Turkish and Urdu could be made directly from the original texts.

We are asked to assure you of the prayers of the Universal House of Justice for the confirmation of your services to the Cause of God.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

For Department of the Secretariat, ...

4. Excerpt from a letter by the Guardian, 14 August 1930

Concerning the different translations of the Words. It is surely the original text that should never be changed. The translations will continue to vary as more and better translations are made. Shoghi Effendi does not consider even his own translations as final, how much more translations made in the early days of the Cause in the West when no competent translators existed.

From a letter on behalf of the Guardian to John Hyde Dunn, 14 August 1930