

Bahá'u'lláh's First Tablet to Napoleon III

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The first Tablet to Napoleon III, together with the Suriy-i-Muluk, the Kitáb-i-Badí', the Prayers for Fasting, the Lawh-i-Sultán, and the Suriy-i-Ra'ís, are listed in *God Passes By* (p. 171) not only as the six "most outstanding among the innumerable Tablets revealed in Adrianople, but as occupying a foremost position among all the writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation." And yet, notwithstanding its significance, it has never been published in its original language.¹ Its historical circumstances are likewise less than self-evident, and existing discussions of this Tablet tend to raise more questions than they answer.²

Content

Bahá'u'lláh's first Tablet to Napoleon III (1808-1873) is altogether unique among His tablets to the monarchs of the world. Its contents are summarised by Shoghi Effendi as follows:

*To Napoleon III Bahá'u'lláh addressed a specific Tablet, which was forwarded through one of the French ministers to the Emperor, in which He dwelt on the sufferings endured by Himself and His followers; avowed their innocence; reminded him of his two pronouncements on behalf of the oppressed and the helpless; and, desiring to test the sincerity of his motives, called upon him to "inquire into the condition of such as have been wronged," and "extend his care to the weak," and look upon Him and His fellow-exiles "with the eye of loving-kindness."*³

Shoghi Effendi's descriptions of other tablets in the same book shows that these descriptions are in fact codifications of their contents and major themes, and so we can assume that the above summary is not missing any features which the Guardian thought worthy of particular notice.

While Shoghi Effendi translated extracts of this Tablet in *The Promised Day is Come*, Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney's partial translation of this Tablet in *L'Oeuvre de Bahaou'llah*, is the most complete published version of this Tablet to date, which remains otherwise inaccessible. The Dreyfus translation contains all the salient features identified by the Guardian in *God Passes By*. On these grounds, and based on the similarities of translation (see appendix 2) it seems likely they were working to the same manuscript, and that we have in the Dreyfus translation an almost complete text.

When Bahá'u'lláh compiled the Suratu'l-Haykal He included His second Tablet to Napoleon, but left out the first one. This makes this Tablet distinctive and may explain why it has not drawn much scholarly notice or been published in publications relating to Bahá'u'lláh's messages to the kings and rulers. In *Modernity and Millenium*, Juan Cole suggests that in this Tablet Bahá'u'lláh was "announcing himself as the world messiah and asking the French to put pressure on the Ottomans to stop their persecution of the Bahá'ís."⁴ In his paper on Bahá'u'lláh's letters to the kings, Cole further holds that Bahá'u'lláh's first Tablet to Napoleon III was "seeking recognition of the new Bahá'í religion".

On the basis of both the Dreyfus translation and Shoghi Effendi’s summary of this Tablet, it seems in fact highly improbable that this Tablet includes a direct messianic proclamation by Bahá’u’lláh or a call to embrace His faith, such as He would voice emphatically in His second Tablet to Napoleon. Certainly, there is nothing in the published translations to suggest such a proclamation. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi writes of this Tablet:

*In His first Tablet Bahá’u’lláh, wishing to test the sincerity of the Emperor’s motives, and deliberately assuming a meek and unprovocative tone . . .*⁵

Nor is there any indication in Shoghi Effendi’s description of a proclamatory passage. Thus, while it is impossible to be completely certain in the absence of an original manuscript or even a full translation, it seems almost definite that this Tablet did not, in fact, involve a messianic announcement. This is the likely reason for its exclusion from the *Suratu’l-Haykal*, which is in essence a proclamatory text, incompatible with a tablet written in “a meek and unprovocative tone”.

This leaves the question of what is missing from the current translation. On the basis of Shoghi Effendi’s descriptive summaries and Dreyfus’ own introduction, the answer would seem to be very little. All the themes and passages described or translated by the Guardian are included in the Dreyfus translation. This would suggest that what is missing is an opening invocation and possibly a brief preamble, addressing Napoleon. It is possible that such a preamble makes allusive reference to His divine claim and station, but probably not forcefully enough (or at all) to draw the Guardian’s or Dreyfus’ notice. Also missing is an ending, almost certainly quite brief, perhaps invoking in typical manner the divine names.

The Tablet breathes pathos and urgency, while retaining a sense of dignity. It narrates in heartbreaking language twenty five years of privations and sufferings afflicting the followers of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, including pillage, violence, exile, slavery, imprisonment, even though they were innocent of any crime. “Sucklings have well nigh drank the cup of martyrdom,”⁶ He laments, and pity hath been shown to neither men nor women!” The tone of Bahá’u’lláh’s appeal to Napoleon amidst such oppression is not one of supplication. Rather, Bahá’u’lláh elevates His address to the level of principle, by celebrating Napoleon’s statements regarding his sense of obligation towards the oppressed and the helpless. Bahá’u’lláh then confirms the validity of such principles, and unambiguously lays out the duty incumbent upon the Emperor: “It beseemeth the king of the age to inquire into the condition of such as have been wronged, and it behooveth him to extend his care to the weak.”⁷ On the basis of this spiritual principle, assumed by the Emperor himself, Bahá’u’lláh makes clear the necessity for Napoleon to extend upon His community “the shelter of royal protection”.⁸

The Tablet was written in the throes of what Shoghi Effendi described as a “supreme crisis”,⁹ and which Bahá’u’lláh named the ‘most great separation’, the ‘Days of stress’ (*Ayyam-i-Shidad*), when Mirza Yahya, whom He designated the “Most Great Idol”, openly defied Him, calumniated Him, humiliated Him and finally made the attempt on His life which left its marks upon His health until the end of His days.¹⁰ In the final passages of His Tablet to Napoleon, Bahá’u’lláh touchingly evokes the condition of His followers in the aftermath of these events: “Their strength hath reached its limit, and there remains in their hearts neither patience nor endurance.”¹¹

Date of Revelation

We know from Bahá’u’lláh’s own testimony (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* p. 45) that this Tablet was revealed in Adrianople. Shoghi Effendi, moreover, relates the revelation of this Tablet, together with the significant tablets mentioned at the beginning of this paper, to the

period “Almost immediately after the ‘Most Great Separation’ had been effected”.¹² Building on this statement Jonah Winters estimates the revelation of this Tablet to have taken place in 1866-1867.¹³ On the basis of both internal and circumstantial evidence, however, the 1866-1867 dating of Bahá'u'lláh's first Tablet to Napoleon must be revised.

In the Tablet Bahá'u'lláh recounts in heartbreaking language twenty five years of suffering and oppression inflicted on the Bábí-Bahá'í communities. This date must refer, in order to tally with the Adrianople dating, to the year 1260 A.H./1844 A.D. and the declaration of the Bab, which makes the date of Revelation sometime in 1285 A.H./1868 A.D. Furthermore, since this Tablet does not mention the Ottoman decree of exile to Gallipoli and thence to 'Akká, the Tablet must have been written before the fifth of Rabí'u'th-Thání 1285 A.H. (July 26, 1868), the date of the Farman.¹⁴ Given its theme, the likelihood is that the Tablet was written as the government opposition that would eventuate in Bahá'u'lláh's exile began to make itself felt in spring-summer of 1868. In all likelihood, the Tablet was written during the turmoil of the Commission of Investigation, following hostile reports from the Vali of Adrianople to the Sublime Porte.

The Porte received the Vali's report on the 20 Dhi'l-Hijjih 1284 (14 April 1868) after a series of interrogations of Bahá'ís and Azalis between April 1 and April 7 of that year. It was found, and recorded on 5 Muharram 1285 (28 April 1868), that Bahá'u'lláh and Mírzá Yahyá had put forth claims to high religious station which could constitute a threat to public order. The ensuing intervention of a Commission of Investigation culminated in a report dated 26 Safar 1285 (18 June 1868) on which the edict of exile was based.¹⁵

On the basis of the above, we can be confident in dating the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh's first Tablet to Napoleon to the period between late April and early June, and most likely May of 1868. The Tablet must have been written around the same time as the Tablet to the Shah, to judge from striking similarities with paragraph 20 of that Tablet.¹⁶

Transmission

The matter of the transmission of this Tablet to Napoleon the III is more elusive. In the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (p. 45), Bahá'u'lláh narrates:

Addressing Himself unto the kings and rulers of the earth—may God, exalted be He, assist them—He imparted unto them that which is the cause of the well-being, the unity, the harmony, and the reconstruction of the world, and of the tranquillity of the nations. Among them was Napoleon III, who is reported to have made a certain statement, as a result of which We sent him Our Tablet while in Adrianople. To this, however, he did not reply. After Our arrival in the Most Great Prison there reached Us a letter from his Minister, the first part of which was in Persian, and the latter in his own handwriting. In it he was cordial, and wrote the following: “I have, as requested by you, delivered your letter . . .”

Likewise, 'Abdu'l-Baha in *Some Answered Questions* (p. 32), stated:

Upon His arrival in prison He addressed an epistle to Napoleon, which He sent through the French ambassador. The gist of it was, “Ask what is Our crime, and why We are confined in this prison and this dungeon.”

By prison, a footnote in the authorised English translation clarifies, Adrianople is meant, in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's own witness. For our purposes the essential point is that the Tablet was sent “through the French ambassador”. The Persian reads “*va ba-vásita safír farán-siya ársál shud*” (Mufáwadát, p. 24), where *safír* means ambassador. Bahá'u'lláh's account, which states the letter was sent from Adrianople through a minister, uses the word *wázir*.¹⁷ In

an unpublished tablet to Sulaymán Khán in private hands, it is mentioned that the first Tablet to Napoleon was sent through a minister (*vázir*) that was friendly to Bahá’u’lláh.¹⁸

- 1) Who was this minister/ambassador who transmitted Bahá’u’lláh’s first Tablet to Napoleon? Dreyfus’ suggestion that this letter was delivered by Cesar Cattafago, consular agent for France in ‘Akká, although correct for Bahá’u’lláh’s second Tablet, is anachronistic for the first Tablet, given its Adrianople dating. We can exclude this option. Three further possibilities present themselves:
- 2) Following ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s usage of the word *safir*, we might think of the French ambassador to Constantinople, Monsieur Bouree. This seems unlikely, for two reasons. First, Bahá’u’lláh being located in Adrianople, and in contact with the acting French vice-consul there, it would make less sense for Him to rely on a French representative based in Constantinople. Second, a letter from the vice-consul at Adrianople, F. Ronzevalle, to the Ambassador at Constantinople,¹⁹ about Bahá’u’lláh’s exile to ‘Akká includes a basic introduction to the situation and person of Bahá’u’lláh, assuming no prior knowledge, which would add to the likelihood of no previous contact.
- 3) Vice-Consul F. Ronzevalle at Adrianople. This seems a more likely candidate, as his letter demonstrates some contact with the Bahá’í community, and it was to him and not to the Ambassador that the Bahá’ís turned after the decree exiling Bahá’u’lláh to ‘Akká was pronounced. It would make sense to assume that an earlier letter would have pursued similar channels. On the other hand, it is one thing to convey a message to the Ambassador in Constantinople, and quite another to deliver it to Napoleon the III himself.

Finally, there is the Comte de Gobineau, who first drew attention to the Cause of the Báb in Europe.²⁰ Thomas Linard hypothesized some years ago²¹ that Gobineau might have been the minister in question, on the basis of the Gobineau-Prokesch letters published by Beverige and MacEoin in *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin*, vol.1, issue 4; as well as from the fact that Gobineau was French plenipotentiary minister in Athens at the time and thus in proximity to ‘Akká.

Linard’s preliminary hypothesis may be further strengthened by Gobineau’s last published letter to Prokesch, dated 31 August 1868.²² In this letter, Gobineau tells Prokesch “confidentially” that Bahá’u’lláh had written to him “some months ago”, which would fit with the likely time of composition of Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet. Gobineau wrote a response, to which he received no reply from Bahá’u’lláh. He then wrote again to Bahá’u’lláh, enclosing a translated copy in his letter to Prokesch, in which he confirms that the unanswered letter to Bahá’u’lláh had been sent “through the intermediary of the Greek Consul”. He then tells Bahá’u’lláh of his lobbying of the Austrian Ambassador on behalf of Bahá’u’lláh and His followers resulting in a “very insistent” exchange with Fu’ad Paşa and the Ottoman government, before concluding: “As for myself, I will act similarly in Paris with respect to the Government of the Emperor.”²³ The mention of a minister friendly to Bahá’u’lláh in the Tablet reported by Dr. Momen, would apply most strongly to Gobineau, whose explicit and implicit expressions of sympathy and advocacy are unmatched by any other European minister in the Adrianople period.

From the above it seems that we can be fairly confident in identifying Gobineau as the vehicle for the transmission of Bahá’u’lláh’s first Tablet to Napoleon III. First, the timescales fit well together, with Bahá’u’lláh’s letter arriving sometime in summer or late spring of 1868, towards the concluding months of Gobineau’s stay in Athens. The fact that Gobineau used the French consul to Athens as intermediary for his reply further strengthens the Greek connection. Secondly, at the time of Bahá’u’lláh’s letter, Gobineau would have fitted ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s designation of a *safir*, and as minister plenipotentiary, could also be described as a *vazir*. Thirdly, the fact that he feels impelled to say to Prokesch that Bahá’u’lláh’s letter to him was confiden-

tial, would support the idea of a message from Bahá'u'lláh of some import and sensitivity. Fourthly, the tone of this first Tablet to Napoleon is similar to that found in the Prokesch-Gobineau papers published by Beveridge and MacEoin cited earlier. Finally, Gobineau's efforts to make clear his political lobbying on behalf of Bahá'u'lláh, with a very clear reference to Paris and the Government of the Emperor make it extremely likely that Gobineau is sensitively alluding to Bahá'u'lláh's letter. From this perspective the urgency with which Gobineau asks for Bahá'u'lláh's response to his previous letter, would point to Gobineau's letter being the self-same one as is cited by Bahá'u'lláh in Epistle to the Son of the Wolf to which we now return:

After Our arrival in the Most Great Prison there reached Us a letter from his Minister, the first part of which was in Persian, and the latter in his own handwriting. In it he was cordial, and wrote the following: "I have, as requested by you, delivered your letter, and until now have received no answer. We have, however, issued the necessary recommendations to our Minister in Constantinople and our consuls in those regions. If there be anything you wish done, inform us, and we will carry it out."

At the very least, as Bahá'u'lláh's citation informs us, the minister in question delivered the Tablet to Napoleon and issued instructions to the French Ambassador in Constantinople as well as the various consuls in the region. This may account in some measure for the willingness of the French Consular Agent in France, Cesar Cattafago, to deliver Bahá'u'lláh's second Tablet to Napoleon. If, as we surmise, the minister in question was Gobineau, he went even further since he wrote the letter cited by Bahá'u'lláh, lobbying the Austrian ambassador and through him Fu'ad Pasha. In addition he mobilised Baron Prokesch for the same purposes.

However, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the minister in question misunderstood the purpose of His Tablet, following His citation above with the following comment:

From his words it became apparent that he understood the purpose of this Servant to have been a request for material assistance.

If Gobineau was the author of this letter, this explains why Bahá'u'lláh left the letter unanswered. Bahá'u'lláh's first Tablet to Napoleon III was clearly aimed at triggering a response equivalent to Napoleon's vaunted emancipation of the oppressed Turks. It was for Napoleon to use his power as the mightiest monarch in Europe to effect the emancipation of the Bahá'í community from the oppression of the Turkish and Persian governments. The minister took the Tablet to be a request for personal assistance for Bahá'u'lláh, possibly of a pecuniary nature (this is before it became apparent that Bahá'u'lláh and His companions in Adrianople faced their most trying exile to date into the fortress town of 'Akká). This, Bahá'u'lláh implies, was not His purpose, which would explain His lack of response to such an offer and to such a letter.

One note of caution to this identification might be the statement in Momen's book of Western accounts of the Bahá'í Faith, questioning on the basis of handwriting and style the authenticity of purported tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in the Gobineau collection in Strasbourg University.²⁴ In fact, Momen has reversed his judgement on the authenticity of these tablets in the light of further research, not only affirming their authenticity, but suggesting they support the identification of Gobineau as the conduit of the first Tablet to Napoleon III.²⁵

Reception

Our sole confirmation that the Tablet reached its recipient comes from the Minister's letter quoted in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. This Tablet would have been delivered sixteen years into the Second French Empire, and one year after the disastrous end of Napoleon's Mexican venture, which left the noble Maximilian dead and his wife Charlotte bereft of her

wits for the rest of her long life. The political context was changing swiftly, in the wake of Napoleon’s alignment with the Papal states against the Italian troops of Garibaldi. He remained, at this time, the preeminent ruler in Europe, “Emperor of the French, the most powerful ruler of his day on the European continent, Napoleon III.”²⁶

Already, the seeds of his destruction were being sown, as prophesised so dramatically by Bahá’u’lláh’s second Tablet to Napoleon. As Bismarck laid Prussian troops into the fortress of the coveted city of Luxembourg, which Napoleon was in process of purchasing from the king of the Netherlands, impending conflict loomed. It was less than two years to the fated Battle of Sedan that would destroy his fortunes.

Shoghi Effendi, in *Promised Day is Come* (p. 51), recounts the following:

It is reported that upon receipt of this first Message that superficial, tricky, and pride-intoxicated monarch flung down the Tablet saying: “If this man is God, I am two gods!”

Shoghi Effendi does not identify the source of this report. As the Bahá’í World Centre Research Department explains:²⁷

much historical research can be done, and indeed needs to be done, before we have a better understanding of the reaction of the Monarchs to the Tablets addressed to them by Bahá’u’lláh. In this regard, the following statement from a letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice may be of interest:

We do not know at the present time of any particular material about Napoleon III with reference to his reported exclamation, “If this man is God, I am two Gods.” Such matters will undoubtedly be investigated by Bahá’í historians in the future. (28 July 1971 to an individual)

What is certain is that the Tablet received no reply. Napoleon’s response is discussed in several instances in Bahá’í writings:

Hadst thou been sincere in thy words, thou wouldst have not cast behind thy back the Book of God, when it was sent unto thee by Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Wise. We have proved thee through it, and found thee other than what thou didst profess.²⁸

He it was who cast the Tablet of God behind him when We made known unto him what the hosts of tyranny had caused Us to suffer.²⁹

During His exile and imprisonment He wrote Tablets of authority to the kings and rulers of the world, announcing His spiritual sovereignty, establishing the religion of God, upraising the heavenly banners of the Cause of God. One of these Tablets was sent to Napoleon III, Emperor of France. He received it with contempt and cast it behind his back.³⁰

Significance

The significance that Shoghi Effendi ascribed to this Tablet by naming it among those “occupying a foremost position among all the writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation” may be somewhat puzzling, given its “meek and unprovocative” tone. The awe-inspiring theological meaning invested into this mild Tablet, however, is only understood when placed in the context of both Bahá’u’lláh’s second Tablet to Napoleon, and the events that followed in Napoleon III’s reign.

It was as a direct consequence of Napoleon’s indifference and tacit rejection of this first Tablet, that Bahá’u’lláh wrote His second and most famous Tablet to Napoleon, giving him a chance to make amends but announcing his demise should he persist in ignoring Bahá’u’lláh.

The contrast between the first and second Tablets could not be greater. If the first one is meek, the second is majestic. If the first one is conciliatory, the second is uncompromisingly challenging. The subject of Napoleon's intervention in the Crimean war is again treated in the second Tablet to Napoleon, as is his altruistic statement of his motivations for waging war on the Czar, but this time the tone in which these common subjects are addressed is altogether different:

O King! We heard the words thou didst utter in answer to the Czar of Russia, concerning the decision made regarding the war (Crimean War). Thy Lord, verily, knoweth, is informed of all. Thou didst say: 'I lay asleep upon my couch, when the cry of the oppressed, who were drowned in the Black Sea, wakened me.' This is what we heard thee say, and, verily, thy Lord is witness unto what I say. We testify that that which wakened thee was not their cry but the promptings of thine own passions, for We tested thee, and found thee wanting. Comprehend the meaning of My words, and be thou of the discerning. It is not Our wish to address thee words of condemnation, out of regard for the dignity We conferred upon thee in this mortal life. We, verily, have chosen courtesy, and made it the true mark of such as are nigh unto Him. Courtesy, is, in truth, a raiment which fitteth all men, whether young or old. Well is it with him that adorneth his temple therewith, and woe unto him who is deprived of this great bounty. Hadst thou been sincere in thy words, thou wouldst have not cast behind thy back the Book of God, when it was sent unto thee by Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Wise. We have proved thee through it, and found thee other than that which thou didst profess. Arise, and make amends for that which escaped thee. Ere long the world and all that thou possessest will perish, and the kingdom will remain unto God, thy Lord and the Lord of thy fathers of old. It behoveth thee not to conduct thine affairs according to the dictates of thy desires. Fear the sighs of this Wronged One, and shield Him from the darts of such as act unjustly.

For what thou hast done, thy kingdom shall be thrown into confusion, and thine empire shall pass from thine hands, as a punishment for that which thou hast wrought. Commotions shall seize all the people in that land, unless thou arisest to help this Cause, and followest Him Who is the Spirit of God (Jesus Christ) in this, the Straight Path.³¹

From this Tablet, as from Shoghi Effendi's interpretations cited already, it becomes evident that Bahá'u'lláh's first Tablet to Napoleon III was, in Bahá'u'lláh's eyes, in the nature of a test of unimagined and altogether vast consequences. Napoleon III's failure to meet the test of sincerity implied in Bahá'u'lláh's demand for restitution of the rights of the Bahá'í community, according to Bahá'u'lláh and later Shoghi Effendi's interpretation, would precipitate the confusion of his kingdom and the passing of his sovereignty. It is implicit in Bahá'u'lláh's second Tablet that, had Napoleon responded differently to His first missive, had He demonstrated that justice and altruism was the driving force of his vast enterprises, be it the Crimean war or the hoped for emancipation of the Bahá'í community, then this dreadful and at the time inconceivable debacle of his reign would not, according to Bahá'u'lláh, have taken place. On the touchstone of this first Tablet to Napoleon the fate of the imperial world was judged and anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh. Thus have the Bahá'í writings invested into this mild and relatively brief Tablet a preponderant theological significance which predicate vast social and historic consequences, ensuring it a high place in the canon of Bahá'í scripture.

Epilogue

It is fitting to close this paper with an extended citation of Shoghi Effendi's theological retelling, so reminiscent in their tone of the essays of Carlyle, of the tale of him whom Victor Hugo named "the man of December":

Napoleon III, son of Louis Bonaparte (brother of Napoleon I), was, few historians will deny, the most outstanding monarch of his day in the West. "The Emperor," it was said of him, "was the state." The French capital was the most attractive capital in Europe, the French court "the most brilliant and luxurious of the XIX century." Possessed of a fixed and indestructible ambition, he aspired to emulate the example, and finish the interrupted work, of his imperial uncle. A dreamer, a conspirator, of a shifting nature, hypocritical and reckless, he, the heir to the Napoleonic throne, taking advantage of the policy which sought to foster the reviving interest in the career of his great prototype, had sought to overthrow the monarchy. Failing in his attempt, he was deported to America, was later captured in the course of an attempted invasion of France, was condemned to perpetual captivity, and escaped to London, until, in 1848, the Revolution brought about his return, and enabled him to overthrow the constitution, after which he was proclaimed emperor. Though able to initiate far-reaching movements, he possessed neither the sagacity nor the courage required to control them.

To this man, the last emperor of the French, who, through foreign conquest, had striven to endear his dynasty to the people, who even cherished the ideal of making France the center of a revived Roman Empire—to such a man the Exile of 'Akká, already thrice banished by Sultan Abdu'l-Aziz, had transmitted, from behind the walls of the barracks in which He lay imprisoned, an Epistle which bore this indubitably clear arraignment and ominous prophecy: ". . . For what thou hast done, thy kingdom shall be thrown into confusion, and thine empire shall pass from thine hands, as a punishment for that which thou hast wrought."

. . . The significance of the somber and pregnant words uttered by Bahá'u'lláh in His second Tablet was soon revealed. He who was actuated in provoking the Crimean War by his selfish desires, who was prompted by a personal grudge against the Russian Emperor, who was impatient to tear up the Treaty of 1815 in order to avenge the disaster of Moscow, and who sought to shed military glory over his throne, was soon himself engulfed by a catastrophe that hurled him in the dust, and caused France to sink from her preeminent station among the nations to that of a fourth power in Europe.

The Battle of Sedan in 1870 sealed the fate of the French Emperor. The whole of his army was broken up and surrendered, constituting the greatest capitulation hitherto recorded in modern history. A crushing indemnity was exacted. He himself was taken prisoner. His only son, the Prince Imperial, was killed, a few years later, in the Zulu War. The Empire collapsed, its program unrealized. The Republic was proclaimed. Paris was subsequently besieged and capitulated. "The terrible Year" marked by civil war, exceeding in its ferocity the Franco-German War, followed. William I, the Prussian king, was proclaimed German Emperor in the very palace which stood as a "mighty monument and symbol of the power and pride of Louis XIV, a power which had been secured to some extent by the humiliation of Germany." Deposed by a disaster "so appalling that it resounded throughout the world," this false and boastful monarch suffered in the end, and till his death, the same exile as that which, in the case of Bahá'u'lláh, he had so heartlessly ignored.³²

Napoleon III's downfall recalls the Old Testament words to the fallen angel: "how low art thou fallen, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" His fate evokes something of awe, the historian's somber wonder aptly voiced by Alistair Horne:

*History knows of perhaps no more startling instance of what the Greeks called peripateia, the terrible fall from prideful heights. Certainly no nation in modern times, so replete with apparent grandeur and opulent in material achievement, has ever been subjected to a worse humiliation in so short a time.*³³

APPENDIX 1

Bahá'u'lláh's First Tablet to Napoleon III

From H. Dreyfus, L'OEUVRE DE BAHÁ'U'LLÁH, vol. 2, pp. 97-98, Editions Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1924

Dreyfus Intro

Many months before this [second Tablet to Napoleon III] was written, and upon arriving at Saint-Jean-d'Acree, Bahá'u'lláh had addressed, through the intermediary of the French Consul, Cesar Cattafago, a letter to Napoleon III which had remained unanswered. We think it of interest to publish its essential contents:

. . . For twenty five years an entire group of God's servants hath not had a single restful night nor an instant's tranquility, and hath been continuously exposed to the assaults of calumny and the workings of violence. How many the children that have been made into orphans! How many the mothers who have lost their child! How many more weep to find themselves separated from their children! How many children do lament and groan in search of their mother! Sucklings have well nigh drank the cup of martyrdom, and pity hath been shown to neither men nor women!

How many the nights when, while the savage beasts and birds of prey reposed peacefully in their forests, these servants could not, in their distress and exhaustion, find safe retreat or shelter! How many the people who, in the eve, were possessed of rank and fortune, yet in the morrow woke in poverty and misery, their goods pillaged and their possessions taken! No land remains untinged by the blood of these oppressed ones, nor soil where the graves of these wretched ones may not be found. How many the women that have been ravished and taken from country to country and town to town, and how many the men that have been sold to slavery! How many have fled into the deserts, with none apprised of their whereabouts! How many others still remain imprisoned! The sighs of these wronged ones rise up night and day, and their appeals for succour can be heard incessantly. And yet they have perpetrated no crime.

[Shoghi Effendi's translation begins below (from The Promised Day Is Come, pp. 51-2)]³⁴

Two statements graciously uttered by the king of the age have reached the ears of these wronged ones. These pronouncements are, in truth, the king of all pronouncements, the like of which have never been heard from any sovereign. The first was the answer given the Russian Government when it inquired why the war (Crimean) was waged against it. Thou didst reply: "The cry of the oppressed who, without guilt or blame, were drowned in the Black Sea wakened me at dawn. Wherefore, I took up arms against thee." These oppressed ones, however, have suffered a greater wrong, and are in greater distress. Whereas the trials inflicted upon those people lasted but one day, the troubles borne by these servants have continued for twenty and five years, every moment of which has held for us a grievous affliction.

The other weighty statement, which was indeed a wondrous statement manifested to the world, was this: "Ours is the responsibility to avenge the oppressed and succour the helpless."

The fame of the Emperor's justice and fairness hath brought hope to a great many souls. It beseemeth the king of the age to inquire into the condition of such as have been wronged, and it behooveth him to extend his care to the weak. Verily, there hath not been, nor is there now, on earth any one as oppressed as we are, or as helpless as these wanderers. [*End of Shoghi Effendi's translation*]

For all living beings, even the savage beasts and birds of prey, have a corner in which to find shelter. These wronged ones, alone, are constantly captive in the chains of violence, their necks prisoned in the bondage of hatred and passion. Their strength hath reached its limit, and there remains in their hearts neither patience nor endurance. They call upon thee to look upon them with the eye of loving-kindness³⁵, that they might enjoy the shelter of royal protection . . .

APPENDIX 2

A Comparison of Shoghi Effendi's translation into English with
Dreyfus' translation into French, rendered in English by Velasco

Shoghi Effendi's translation (*Promised Day is Come*)

Two statements graciously uttered by the king of the age have reached the ears of these wronged ones. These pronouncements are, in truth, the king of all pronouncements, the like of which have never been heard from any sovereign. The first was the answer given the Russian Government when it inquired why the war (Crimean) was waged against it. Thou didst reply: "The cry of the oppressed who, without guilt or blame, were drowned in the Black Sea wakened me at dawn. Wherefore, I took up arms against thee." These oppressed ones, however, have suffered a greater wrong, and are in greater distress. Whereas the trials inflicted upon those people lasted but one day, the troubles borne by these servants have continued for twenty and five years, every moment of which has held for us a grievous affliction.

The other weighty statement, which was indeed a wondrous statement manifested to the world, was this: "Ours is the responsibility to avenge the oppressed and succour the helpless." The fame of the Emperor's justice and fairness hath brought hope to a great many souls. It beseemeth the king of the age to inquire into the condition of such as have been wronged, and it behooveth him to extend his care to the weak. Verily, there hath not been, nor is there now, on earth any one as oppressed as we are, or as helpless as these wanderers.

Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney's translation into French, rendered by Velasco into English*

Two words, pronounced by the King of the age, have reached their ears, so beautiful that no sovereign hath ever uttered their like. The first was the response to the Russian government who demanded wherefore was war waged against it. Thou hast said: "the cries of the wretched innocents thrown into the Black Sea have, in the morn, woken me from my sleep, and it was this that decided me to battle." Behold, these oppressed ones are more wretched still and more miserable, since the trials of those lasted but a day, whereas the calamities we endure have not ceased for one moment in twenty five years!

The other remarkable word which, verily, astonished the world, was: "It is for us to avenge the oppressed and succour the wretched." The royal voice of justice and retribution thereupon raised the hopes of a great multitude. It behoveth indeed the rulers of this world to inquire into the condition of the oppressed; sympathy towards the feeble is among the duties incumbent upon them. Verily, there is not, nor hath there ever been any upon the earth more sorely oppressed than us, nor hath there ever been seen any more feeble.

* Translations by Dreyfus-Barney into French and then by Ismael Velasco into English are both to be considered Provisional Translations, not for further distribution.

Notes

- 1) See McGlinn (ed.), *Leiden Bibliography of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets*. The bibliography overlooks Shoghi Effendi's translation in *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 51 as well as that in H. Dreyfus' *L'Oeuvre de Bahaou'llah*, vol. 2, pp. 97-98
- 2) Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 45, 47; ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 32; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* p. 171, 173, and *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 51; *L'Oeuvre de Bahaou'llah*, vol. 2, pp. 97-98; Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2 pp. 368-369 (which merely repeats the latter reference); Jonah Winters “Overview of the Tablets to Napoleon”, online at www.bahai-library.org/study; Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millenium*, p. 63, and “Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets to the Rulers”, www-personal.umich.edu/jrcole/bhking.htm
- 3) *God Passes By* (p. 173)
- 4) Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millenium*, p. 63
- 5) *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 51
- 6) My translation from the Dreyfus text.
- 7) Cited by Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 52
- 8) My translation from the Dreyfus text.
- 9) *God Passes By*, p. 163.
- 10) *Ibid.* chapter X.
- 11) *Ibid.*
- 12) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 171. The Most Great Separation refers to Bahá'u'lláh's seclusion in the house of Ridhā Bey for two months beginning March 10, 1866, marking His final break of relations with Mirza Yahya. Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *ibid.* p. 160ff.; Glenn Cameron and Wendy Momen, *Basic Bahá'í Chronology*; Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2 pp. 165ff.; Juan Cole, “The Surah of God: Introduction and translation”, www-personal.umich.edu/jrcole/bhallah.htm
- 13) Jonah Winters “Overview of the Tablets to Napoleon”, he follows Cameron and Momen in dating the Most Great Separation to 1866.
- 14) Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 186; Moojan Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, p. 199
- 15) See Momen, *ibid.*, p. 199-200
- 16) Cf. “Summons of the Lord of Hosts”, para 20.
- 17) Cf. *Lawh-i Mubárák khitab bih Shaykh Muhammad Taqí*, bahai.com online version, p. 32
- 18) As reported by Moojan Momen, personal communication
- 19) Cited in Moojan Momen, *op. cit.*, p. 190
- 20) See his *Religions et Philosophies Dans L'Asie Centrale*. See also biographical information in Momen,
- 21) e-mail communication
- 22) Cited in Momen, *op. cit.* p. 208
- 23) *Ibid.* pp. 208-209.
- 24) *Ibid.* p. 191
- 25) Personal communication
- 26) *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 20
- 27) Cited in letter of the Universal House of Justice, 1997 Nov 06, “Responses of Napoleon III and Queen Victoria”
- 28) Second Tablet to Napoleon III, cited in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 47
- 29) *Kitab-i Aqdas*, para 86.
- 30) ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 211
- 31) Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 50-51
- 32) Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 49-52
- 33) Alistair Horne, *The Fall of Paris*, p. 34, Macmillan, London, 1965.
- 34) Shoghi Effendi's translation makes it almost certain that Dreyfus was working from an identical manuscript, and shows the remarkable closeness of his French translation to the Guardian's own, which may mean that the Guardian may have used Dreyfus' work as a starting-point to his own translation. See the Appendix 2 for a comparison between my original translation of Dreyfus' French, and Shoghi Effendi's English translation cited here.
- 35) “with the eye of loving kindness” inserted here on the basis of Shoghi Effendi's translation in *God Passes By*, p. 173